ソードアート・オンライン3

フェアリィ・ダンス

禁断のデスバトルMMO『ソードアート・オンライン』から現実世界に戻ってきたキリト。彼は攻略パートナーであり、想い人でもあるアスナのもとに向かう。

しかし、結城明日奈（アスナ）は、あの悪夢のゲームからまだ帰還していなかった。

困惑と絶望に包まれるキリト。唯一の手がかりは、鳥籠の中で佇む≪妖精姿≫のアスナという謎の画像データのみ。どうやら彼女は、高スペックVRMMO≪アルヴヘイム・オンライン≫というゲーム内に囚われているらしい。

キリトはアスナを救うため、飛翔する妖精プレイヤーたちが交錯する≪ALO≫に飛び込んでいく……!!　WEB上でも屈指の人気を誇った『フェアリィ・ダンス』編、スタート!!

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ソードアート・オンライン3
フェアリィ・ダンス

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川原 礫（かわはら れき）

ソロクエストでレベル上げするの寂しいのでやめます！やっぱネットゲームはパーティープレイしてなんぼですよね。あれ　おかしいな……　パーティー勧誘窓が出せないぞ……僕の人生バグってる！

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イラスト：abec

あべしっ！

カバー／暁印刷

SAO
SWORD ART ONLINE
003
REKI KAWAHARA abec bee-pee
SWORD ART ONLINE
FAIRY DANCE

Nerve Gear
「—Quickly.....quickly come and save me, Kirito-kun..... 」
Asuna
A captured girl inside the high specification VRMMO «Alfheim Online».

「Papa is carefree as usual.」
Yui§ A young girl AI who adores Kirito as her papa. Supports Kirito as a «Navigation Pixie» in «ALO».
「Oh ..... how exciting. At this rate I want to fly all the way.....」
Kirito§ The strongest «Solo Player» in «SAO». Turns to a «Spriggan» swordsman in «ALO».
「—Come, hurry! On to Yggdrasil!」
Lyfa§ A girl Kirito met in «ALO». The race of her fairy avatar is «Sylph».

「..... I'm so stupidstupidstupid! 」
Kirigaya Suguha
Kirito's [Kirigaya Kazuto's] younger sister. She's a third-year in junior high school and is a part of the Kendo club.

「—If you can withstand my attacks for 30 seconds, I'll trust you as an ambassador.」
—Eugene§
The strongest knight among all fairy avatars. His race is «Salamander». Possesses the legendary weapon «Demonic Sword Gram».
「You're so generous, aren't you.」

YGGDRASIL
THE DESTINATION OF ALL PLAYERS WHO LOG IN TO <<ALFHEIM ONLINE>>.
THE TRIBE WHICH REACHES THE LEGENDARY FLOATING CITY ABOVE <YGGDRASIL> AND HAS AN AUDIENCE WITH THE <FAIRY KING OBERON> WHO LIVES THERE IS ABLE TO BE REBORN AS A HIGH-CLASS RACE <ALF>. BY BEING REBORN INTO TRUE FAIRIES, THE <ALF>, THE HOVER LIMIT IMPOSED ON THE SYSTEM IS ELIMINATED AND UNLIMITED FLIGHT IS POSSIBLE. AND ALONG WITH IT THEY ARE CAPABLE OF BECOMING THE RULERS OF THIS INFINITE SKY. IT'S POSSIBLE TO ENTER THIS FLOATING CITY THROUGH A DOME AT THE ROOT OF <YGGDRASIL>. HOWEVER, GUARDIAN KNIGHTS WHO BOAST OF OVERWHELMING STRENGTH GUARD THE ENTRANCE. ONE YEAR HAS PASSED SINCE THE OPENING OF <<ALO>>, YET THIS QUEST HAS NOT YET BEEN CLEARED.

Prologue

There were three deep green lighted dots, they were aligned like a modest constellation.

Kirigaya Suguha extended the finger of her right hand, probing the lights.

The LED indicators displayed the current operating status of the FullDive model VR machine, «Nerve Gear». Situated on the front part of the headgear, the indicators monitored—from the right—the main power, network connection, and cerebral connection. At the moment that the light on the far left edge were to turn red, it would signify the destruction of the brain of the gear's user.

The owner of the gear was on a spacious gel bed in the middle of a completely off-white hospital room, in a never awakening sleep. No, that was not an accurate expression. In actuality, his soul was currently fighting day and night in some far away parallel universe—risking his liberation along with several thousand other people being held as captive players.

"Onii-chan..."

Suguha called out to her quietly sleeping brother, Kazuto.

"Already two years have passed, huh.... I, next time, will be a high school student, you know.... If you don't return soon, I'll eventually get ahead of you..."

She lowered her finger from the LED, tracing a line on her brother's cheek. During the long coma, Kazuto's muscles began to wane, and that razor-thin line gave his profile an exceedingly feminine gloom, despite his originally androgynous impression. Even his mother joked, calling him the family's «Sleeping Beauty».

His face was not the only part that thinned. His whole body had grown thin and worn out—he was in a pitiful state compared to Suguha, who had been training in Kendo from a young age—his body weight now was obviously insufficient. She wondered, if this kept up, would he be reduced to nothing...? Recently, she had been seized with such a fear.

However, Suguha had been struggling against the possibility of crying while in the hospital room since a year ago. At that time, a member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication's «SAO Incident

Countermeasure Team» had informed them. A government official—with long forelocks that draped over his black edged spectacles, and wearing somewhat respectful clothing—informed them in a blurry voice that her brother's «level» was standing at the top few percentages of the whole group within the game—that he was constantly going to the dangerous front-lines to battle and was one of the few capturing players.

It was confirmed that today as well, her brother was fighting in a battle adjoined with death. That was why Suguha would not cry here. Apart from that, she thought of holding his hand to cheer him on.

"Do your best.... Do your best, Onii-chan".

As always, Kazuto's bony right hand was wrapped by both of her hands—as she prayed earnestly in silence, a voice suddenly came from behind her.

"Ah, you came, Suguha".

She turned around in a fluster.

"Oh, mother ..."

The one standing there was her mother, Midori. This hospital room's sliding door used a motor drive, so the sound of its opening and closing were dreadfully silent; this resulted in Suguha failing to hear her mother enter.

Midori then, after nimbly arranging the bundle of cosmos in her right hand into the bedside vase, lowered her back onto a chair next to Suguha. Probably returning from her workplace, she wore a cotton shirt with slim jeans and a leather blouse on top, giving her a rough appearance. With her thin makeup and hair that was simply tied behind her back, one could not see the appearance of a woman turning forty next year. Although her job as editor-in-chief of a computer information magazine may be partly to blame, the person herself did not have any intention of acting more appropriate her age—so to Suguha, you could say that her mother was more like an older sister.

"Mother, you came properly. Isn't it before proofreading is completed?"

Suguha said, and Midori laughed.

"I forcefully slipped away and came. I don't always come very often, but at least for today."

"That's right.... Today was onii-chan's...birthday, wasn't it?"

Both of them kept silent for a brief while, intently watching Kazuto as he slept on the bed. The curtain swayed as a sunset colored draft entered the room, wafting the aroma of the cosmos faintly through the air.

"Kazuto is... already 16 years old, huh..."

Midori muttered and sighed.

"... Even now, I recall that incident like it happened yesterday. That time when Minetaka-san and I were watching a movie in the living room, and Kazuto suddenly said from behind, 'Please tell me about my real parents' ".

Suguha motionlessly gazed at Midori's charming lips with very light rouge, a light nostalgic bitter smile appearing on them.

"At that time, I was really surprised. Kazuto was only 10 years old. Till Suguha entered high school... it was a secret that we had planned to keep for 7 more years, but he found out about his Juki Net[1]'s erase records."

When Suguha had heard about that for the first time, before she was surprised, she gave the same bitter laugh as her mother.

"That's seriously just like Onii-chan, huh?"

"We were so surprised that we didn't feign being ignorant and hurt. That seemed to be Kazuto´s strategy, and later Minetaka-san said 'we had been had' and was chagrined."

"Ah, haha," the both of them went laughing, and for a brief while they gazed at the sleeping Kazuto without a word.

The brother, Kirigaya Kazuto, who had always been living together with Suguha from the moment she had awareness of things around her, was to be precise, her «cousin».

The married couple Kirigaya Minetaka and Midori's own child was Suguha, while Kazuto was Midori's sister's; this meant that he was the child of Suguha's aunt. Her aunt and her aunt's husband, without a choice, left their only child, who was not even a year old, and passed away in an accident. The serious nature of the injuries they bared eventually putting an end to their lives, and Midori was left to take charge of Kazuto.

That fact was told to Suguha by both her parents during winter two years ago, around that time, Kazuto was trapped in a virtual reality game going by the name of «Sword Art Online». Suguha, who had already received a big shock from the incident, was in a cruel state of confusion; she went to Midori, asking why she did not tell her earlier and why she was the only one not being told, and took out her confusion on Midori.

Two years had passed, and even now within the bottom of her heart, the feeling of alienation was lurking, of being the only one who did not know anything. However, during this time she had finally come to understand her parents' feelings at that time.

Their original plan, of informing Suguha of the truth after she entered high school, had been hastened, in short, she was told everything of the truth of her family while Kazuto was still alive, which was the bitter decision both her parents made. Within a month's time of the outbreak of the SAO incident, there was an absurd number of 2000 deaths. Under those circumstances, the both of them could not help but make a compulsory resolution for Kazuto's certain death. At least after everything was over, they would not regret that Suguha «did not know it», which was what both her parents must have certainly thought.

Suguha, who was still carrying a great number of conflicting emotions, frequently visited this hospital room, which Kazuto was admitted to, and continued thinking earnestly. The matter of her brother not being her real brother and what was lost.

Before long, she came up with an answer that it was nothing.

That nothing would change. There would not be a single thing hurt. As before she knew the truth and after she knew, she, as always, had only been praying for Kazuto's well-being and his return.

Henceforth in those two years, only half of Suguha's prayer had been delivered.

"... Hey, Mother."

While gazing at his profile, Suguha let out a soft sound.

"Yes?"

"... Onii-chan, ever since he was in junior high that time, he has always been only playing net games, right... Do you think that there is a relation?"

That question, which omitted a single word of him not being the Kirigaya family's own child, made Midori immediately shake her head.

"No, it's not related. That's because when this child was six, he constructed a self-made machine using my room's junk parts. Rather, my PC maniac blood was inherited. Mentally that is."

Gently smiling, Suguha nudged her mother's arm with her elbow.

"Speaking of which, Mother really liked games as a child, too, or so I've heard from grandmother."

"That's right; I have been playing net games since I was in primary school. Kazuto somehow is not worth worrying about."

Once again, the both of them laughed wholeheartedly, Midori focused her loving eyes on the bed.

"... However, no matter in whichever game, I was never a top player. I did not have enough patience and resolution. That blood is not in common with me but with you. Even continuing Kendo for 8 years, you have that same blood flowing, which is how Kazuto is surviving even now. Eventually, he could unexpectedly return."

"Plop", Midori placed her hand on Suguha's head and stood up.

"So, I'll be leaving first. You also don't be home too late."

"Okay, I understand."

Suguha nodded, and Midori looked at Kazuto one more time, and softly said "Happy Birthday". Afterwards, she did several quick winks, turned around, and quickly left the hospital room.

Suguha grabbed the hem of her uniform skirt ready with both hands, took a deep breath, and again looked at the LED indicators of the headgear covering her brother's head.

The green lights, that displayed the net connection and cerebrum connection statuses, were repeatedly flickering rapidly.

Right now, on the other side of the network, there were the SAO server and Kazuto's consciousness, and through Nerve Gear, a countless number of signals were being exchanged.

Regarding to where her brother was right now. He could be wandering with a map in one hand in a gloomy dungeon. He could be in the middle of an evaluation at a second-hand shop. Or maybe, facing a dreadful monster, he could be boldly crossing swords with it.

She gently reached out both of her hands, and wrapped them around his thin, white right hand, again.

Kazuto's true sense of touch was totally canceled by Nerve Gear at the medulla oblongata, before it reached the brain. However, looking at the skin that Suguha made contact with, she believed that her encouragement would have surely reached him.

This was because Suguha could feel it once again. This young man's, her brother's, who, to be accurate, is her cousin, soul is emitting intense temperature. He had the firm intention and would definitely survive and return to the real world.

Over the other side of the white curtain, the flickering golden light soon changed into vermilion and again into purple; although it was that time when the hospital room was wrapped in dim light, Suguha continued to stay there. Without moving, she listened attentively to her brother's modest breathing.

The urgent message of Kazuto awakening was reported from the hospital. That was a month later, on the 7th of November, 2024.

Chapter 1

Katon, koton.

The plain wooden rocking chair made gentle sounds as it swayed back and forth on the porch.

The soft sunlight of late autumn shone through the top of a cypress tree. A light breeze gently blew across the surface of a distant lake.

Her cheeks lay upon my chest as she breathed gently and fell asleep.

The time, filled with golden tranquility, continued to flow by steadily.

Katon, koton.

I rocked the chair and gently stroked the girl's chestnut-colored hair. Although she was already asleep, a faint smile appeared on her lips.

A group of sprites played on the front lawn. The beef stew in the kitchen was simmering away at an audible boil. I wished this gentle world, in a small house deep within the heart of the forest, would continue on for eternity. But I knew this was an impossible wish.

Katon, koton.

As the chair's legs continued to sound, the sands of time fell away one grain at a time.

I tried to pull the girl closer to my chest as if I was resisting fate.

However, my arms managed to embrace only thin air.

I quickly sprang open my startled eyes. Her body, which was leaning against me just a second ago, had completely disappeared. I stood up from the chair and looked around the area.

Like the falling curtain of a stage, the color of the sunset steadily darkened. The creeping darkness began to dye the entire forest in pitch black.

I stood up straight in the icy winter wind and called out her name.

But there was no reply. Neither in the front garden where sprites played, nor in the kitchen—her figure could no longer be found anywhere.

Before I realized it, the entire house had been surrounded by darkness. The house's furniture and walls began to fall apart and disappear as if they were made from paper. Only the rocking chair and myself remained behind in this darkness. Even though no one sat on the chair, it continued to sway back and forth without changing.

Katon, koton.

Katon, koton.

I closed my eyes, plugged my ears, and mustered all my strength to call out her name.

My eyes quickly opened to the clear and loud voice. I no longer knew whether I shouted out only within the dream or if I actually called out in reality.

Lying on the bed, I closed my eyes and sought to return to the beginning of my dream. But I soon gave up, and after a while slowly opened my eyes once again.

Thin wooden planks entered my sight instead of the white panels of hospital walls. I was lying in a soft mattress atop cotton sheets instead of some gel material.

This was my — Kirigaya Kazuto's room in the real world.

I lifted up my upper body and looked around my surroundings. The 6-mat room had an uncommon floor made of natural wood. Only three pieces of furniture could be found within the room: a computer hard-drive, a router, and the bed I was sitting on.

An old-looking piece of headgear was placed on the center of the vertically-raised routers.

Its name was «Nerve Gear», a full dive model VR interface which had locked me inside a virtual reality world for two years. After a long and difficult battle, I was finally released from the machine, and could finally see, feel, and touch the real world.

Yes, I had returned.

But, the girl who had swung her sword and communed her heart with me was...

Pain suddenly hit my chest, and I shifted my sight away from the Nerve Gear and stood up. I glanced at a mirror hanging on the wall. The embedded EL panel on the wall clearly displayed the current date and time.

Sunday, January 19th, 2025. 7:15AM.

Two months had already passed since I returned to the real world, but I still couldn't get used to my appearance. Although the swordsman Kirito and the current Kirigaya Kazuto were supposed to have the same appearance, my loss of body weight had yet to fully recover, so the bony body underneath my T-shirt was extremely frail.

I suddenly noticed two lines of tears shining on my face in the mirror and wiped it off with my right hand.

"I've turned into a complete crybaby... Asuna."

I muttered and walked to the large window on the south side of the room. I opened the curtains with both hands, and the glaring sunlight of a winter morning dyed the inside of my room in pale yellow.

* * *

Kirigaya Suguha was really happy as she walked across the ice in the courtyard and then sped up.

The snow that fell two days ago had yet to melt completely, and the mid-January morning air was extremely cold.

She stopped at the edge of a pond, which was covered by a thin layer of ice, and set the shinai[2] in her right hand down against the trunk of a nearby black pine. To expel the lingering drowsiness from her body, she took several deep breaths, placed both hands at the knees, and began her stretching exercises.

Her muscles, which had yet to awaken fully, slowly loosened up. First came the knees, then she felt a prickling sensation as blood began to circulate in her calves and ankles.

Suguha stretched to reach straight down with both hands, gradually bending her back— until she abruptly stopped. The smooth ice that formed over the lake reflected her appearance back to her.

Her short hair, cut above her eyebrows and in line with her shoulders, was black with tinges of blue. Her eyebrows shared the same ink black color and were very thick, while two eyes filled with unyielding spirit lay below them. Together, her reflection had a seemingly boyish appearance. The traditional white dōgi and long black hakama[3] she wore only helped to accentuate this.

––As I thought... I just don't resemble... my Onii-chan...

It was a thought that often filled her mind in recent days. She thought of this every time she saw her own face at the bathroom's entrance. It wasn't that she disliked her appearance; she didn't care that much to begin with. But ever since her brother Kazuto returned to this house, her mind had began to subconsciously make comparisons.

––It's no use, no matter how much I think about it.

Suguha shook her stubborn head and resumed stretching.

After she finished stretching, she picked up the shinai that was left propped up against the black pine. She gripped it, feeling the familiarity in her palm from its long use; then she straightened her back and assumed a centered posture.

She took a deep breath while maintaining her stance— then instantly, with sharpened vigor, she struck out directly frontward with the shinai. Her keen movement seemed to cut the morning air, which startled a number of sparrows as they all flew off from the branch overhead.

The Kirigaya family home was an old Japanese house that lingered alongside the dated streets of southern Saitama. The entire extended family had been living here, as Suguha's grandfather, who had passed away four years ago, was a very strict and old-fashioned person.

He served in the police force for many years and was a famous kendo practitioner during his youth. He hoped that his only son, who was Suguha's father, would continue in his footsteps on the path of kendo. Her father had grasped the shinai until high school, but then he readily gave it up to study abroad in America and eventually found employment at a foreign financial securities company. After being assigned to the Japanese branch, he met and married Suguha's mother Midori, but continued a life of routine travelling across the Pacific ocean. By that time, Suguha's grandfather had redirected his passion toward her and the one year older Kazuto.

Suguha and her brother were made to join the neighborhood kendo dojo during elementary school. But because of her mother's influence as an editor for a computer systems magazine, her brother loved the keyboard far more than the shinai and left the dojo within two years. However, Suguha wasn't like her brother. She had found an affinity with kendo and continued to grasp her shinai even after her grandfather died.

Suguha was now fifteen years old. Last year, she had advanced far enough in the middle school competitions to rank as one of the best in the nation. By springtime, she had been recruited by one of the most famous high schools in the prefecture.

But––

In the past, she had never lost her path forward. She really liked kendo: not only did it meet the expectations of those around her, it had also made her happy.

But two years ago, when her brother got involved in the incident that shook all of Japan, turmoil arose within her heart. One could say that she regretted deeply. Ever since her brother gave up Kendo when she was seven years old, a profound gap had opened up between the two of them, and Suguha was extremely regretful that she never put forth the effort to close the divide.

The brother who had cast aside the shinai spent every day immersed in computers, as if seeking to quench his remaining thirst. He built a machine from parts and then helped his mother program it when he was just an elementary school student. For Suguha, the stuff he talked about was like a foreign language.

Of course, school had taught Suguha some lessons in computer use, and she had a small computer in her room. However, her knowledge of computers was limited to just email exchange and web browsing; it was impossible for her to understand the world her brother lived in. This was especially the case for the networked RPG games her brother was addicted to, which had always felt detestable to her. Since then she had put on a fake persona, but she found it impossible to get closer to other people who also interacted with a false mask.

Ever since her childhood, Suguha and her brother shared a relationship that was as close as best friends. But as her brother left her for a whole different world, Suguha buried her loneliness by devoting herself

wholeheartedly to kendo. The distance between them continued to expand, and their daily conversations continued to drop; before Suguha had realized it, their relationship had fallen to a merely normal one.

But truth be told, Suguha constantly felt lonely. She wanted to talk to her brother more. She wanted to understand her brother's world, wanted her brother to come and watch her competitions.

However, just when she was about to express these feelings, that incident happened.

The nightmarish incident named "SWORD ART ONLINE". Ten thousand youths from across Japan were confined by an electronic cage and fell into a long sleep.

Her brother had been admitted to a major hospital in Saitama. Then, on the first time Suguha had gone to visit him...

As she saw her comatose brother, restrained to the sickbed with numerous cords and concealed by that dreadful headgear, Suguha burst into tears. It was the first time since her birth that she cried. She simply clung to her brother and wept aloud.

There may never be another chance to exchange words with him. Why didn't she try to close the distance between them earlier? It shouldn't have been that difficult; it should have been possible for her.

It was then that she began to seriously reconsider whether she should continue to practice kendo and what her true feelings were. But she was so lost that she never found an answer. During her fourteenth and fifteenth years when she couldn't see her brother, Suguha had entered a high school based on recommendations from others around her, but whether she should continue walking down this path was a doubt in her heart that would not disappear.

If her brother came back, then she would definitely talk to him a lot. She would get rid of all her confusion and anxiety, and frankly tell him her thoughts. Then, two months ago, after Suguha made her decision, a miracle occurred. Her brother had broken the curse through his own power and returned.

––But by that point, her relationship with her brother had already changed drastically. Suguha heard from her mother Midori personally that Kazuto was not her real brother, but actually a cousin.

Her father Minetaka was an only child, but her mother Midori had an older sister who passed away early; however, Suguha didn't know about this. Therefore, when Suguha learned that Kazuto was her mother's sister's child, she found herself at a loss and wasn't sure what type of relationship they should maintain. Should they be a little more distant? Should they remain the same? She had no idea how she should express herself over this relationship.

...Yeah. There is one thing, that would not change...

As Suguha pondered over all this, she swung her shinai down sharply as if to cut her own train of thought. It was too scary to keep going down that path of thinking, so she began her practice with the shinai in order to redirect her attention elsewhere.

When she finished her required number of sets, the angle of the morning sun had changed significantly. She wiped the sweat off her forehead, put down the shinai, and turned back toward her house...

"Ah..."

The moment she looked toward the house, Suguha suddenly froze in her footsteps.

She wasn't aware that Kazuto, who was wearing a sweatshirt and sitting on the porch, had been looking in her direction. As their eyes met, he smiled and spoke:

"Good morning."

As he said that, he tossed the small bottle of mineral water in his left hand over to her. Suguha caught it with her right hand before responding:

"G-good morning.... Seriously, if you've been watching me, you should have said something."

"But, it looked like you were seriously concentrating."

"Not really, I'm always like this."

Suguha secretly felt really happy that they were able to talk so naturally with one another over these two months. She picked a spot to Kazuto's right which kept a delicate distance from him and then sat down. Setting the shinai aside, she opened the bottle and placed it at her mouth; the cold water permeated her hot body and felt refreshingly pleasant.

"I see you've kept it up this whole time..."

Kazuto picked up Suguha's shinai and swung it lightly with his right hand from his sitting position. He immediately tilted his head to one side and said:

"So light..."

"Huh?"

Suguha removed the bottle from her mouth and looked at Kazuto.

"This is made of genuine bamboo, so it's quite heavy actually. It's about fifty grams heavier than the ones made from carbon."

"Ah, uh huh. That... is merely what I felt... but when it comes to comparison..."

Kazuto suddenly plundered the bottle from Suguha's hands and then quickly drank all the remaining water.

"Ah..."

Suguha's face began to redden without even thinking about it. She pouted her lips and said unhappily.

"W-What are you trying to compare with?"

Kazuto put the empty bottle on the porch and then stood up without answering.

"Hey, want to try sparring with me?"

Dumbfounded, Suguha looked straight at Kazuto's face.

"As in... a match?"

"Yes."

Kazuto nodded as if it was natural, even though he didn't have any interest in kendo.

"What about protectors...?"

"Hmmm, it's probably okay if we don't wear them... but it would be bad if Suguha got injured. I think grandfather's protectors are still around, so let's go to the dojo."

"Oooh."

Suguha completely forgot her hesitation from earlier and wondered why he would suddenly say such a thing; she smiled and said:

"Aren't you confident? Trying to pick a match with a national quarter-finalist? Besides..."

Her facial expressions then changed.

"Is your body alright...? You shouldn't be reckless..."

"Hehe, I'll show you the results of my daily rehabilitation training at the gym."

Kazuto chuckled and began to briskly walk toward the back of the house. Suguha hurried to follow.

The Kirigaya house was a rather spacious lot, and a dojo laid to the east of her mother's room. They followed grandfather's will and didn't demolish it,

so Suguha used it for her daily practice, thoroughly maintained it, and kept all the equipment there.

The two of them entered the dojo barefooted, bowed to each other, and then began to prepare themselves respectively. Fortunately, grandfather's physique was almost the same as Kazuto's; the protectors they brought out were old but just the right fit. As they finished tying the headgear's laces at the same time, the two of them walked to the center of the dojo and bowed to each other once again.

Suguha slowly stood up from her crouching position, grasped her favorite shinai tightly, and took a centered stance. Meanwhile, Kazuto—

"W-what is that, Onii-chan?"

Upon seeing Kazuto's stance, Suguha blurted out without thinking. Odd was the only way to describe it. His left foot was half a body in front, his waist was lowered, and the shinai in his right hand was held downwards with its tip nearly touching the floor. His left hand seemed as if it was only touching the handle for appearance's sake.

"If a referee was here, he would be absurdly angry at that."

"It's fine, this is my sword style."

Suguha took a deep breath and readjusted her posture. Kazuto further widened the distance between his feet and lowered his center of mass.

Suguha thought about kicking off with enough power to directly land a powerful strike against her opponent. But Kazuto's weird stance made her unsure of what to do. Although there was an opening, it didn't feel easy to take advantage of. That stance felt like it was the product of many years of experience—

However, that couldn't be possible. Kazuto only wielded the shinai for two years when he was seven and eight. He only could have learned the basics during that time.

As if noticing Suguha's confusion, Kazuto suddenly began to move. He dashed in at a low angle as if he was gliding and his shinai sprang upwards from his lower right. It was not of a speed to be surprised at, but as it was a sudden attack, Suguha had to move by reflex. And with her right foot opened up,

"Kote!!"[4]

Suguha swung down at Kazuto's left forearm. It should have been perfectly timed, but her strike splendidly cut through the air.

It was an unbelievable dodge. Kazuto had released his left hand from the handle, and drew it towards his body. Was that even possible? Targeted at Suguha, taken aback with surprise, the shinai held by Kirito's right hand alone rushed in. Confounded, she frantically dodged.

By the time the two swapped positions, having turned around to face each other as they kept a distance again, Suguha's consciousness had changed completely. A pleasant tension filled her entire body, as though her blood was boiling. This time, it was Suguha's turn to strike. Her forte, a forearm strike—

But this time as well, Kazuto cleanly evaded that. He pulled his arms back, twisted his body, and allowed Suguha's shinai to slide past with a paper-thin gap. Suguha was dumbfounded. Her high-speed strikes were well-acclaimed even within the club, and she had no recollection of a scene with someone managing to clearly dodge all of her consecutive attacks.

Getting serious, Suguha began a fierce assault. She drove the tip of the shinai in continuously, striking faster than one could breathe. But Kazuto kept on dodging and dodging. The unfaltering movement of his eyes made it seem like he had already fully grasped the movement of Suguha's shinai.

Irritated, Suguha forcibly closed the distance and locked her shinai against Kazuto's. Against Suguha's well-trained legs and torso, Kazuto began to stagger under the overwhelming pressure. Without letting him escape, Suguha seized the moment to launch a finishing blow directly toward Kazuto's head.

"Men!!"[5]

'Ah', Suguha finally realized a moment too late. She didn't hold back at all on her attack, and it crashed fiercely into the metal grill on Kazuto's protective headgear. Bashiin! A high-pitched clang resounded throughout the dojo.

Kazuto continued to stagger backwards for a few steps before he finally stopped.

"A-are you okay, Onii-chan!?"

Suguha frantically asked. Kazuto lightly waved his left hand to show that he was fine.

"...Ah, I lost. Sugu sure is strong; Heathcliff doesn't compare against you at all."

"...Are you really alright...?"

"Yeah. Match finished."

After saying that, Kazuto took several steps back and then made a few even stranger movements. He flourished the shinai in his right hand left and right, then held it to his back and made a "hyuhyun" sound. After that, he straightened his back and scratched his head beyond the mask with his left hand, which made a crunching sound. All of this made Suguha really worried.

"Ah, your head was hit, so..."

"N-no!! It's just an old habit..."

After they bowed to each other, Kazuto sat down in a formal posture and began to untie the laces on his protectors.

The two of them left the dojo together, went to the washroom, and rinsed the sweat off their faces. She originally intended to just play around a bit; she never expected it to suddenly turn so serious and leave her entire body feeling overheated.

"Nevertheless, I was really surprised. Onii-chan, when did you practice?"

"Eh, that attack pattern of mine... seems like sword skills really can't be managed without system assist."

Once again, Kazuto muttered something that made absolutely no sense.

"But it was really fun. Maybe I should try kendo again..."

"Really!? Really!?"

Suguha suddenly became energetic as a broad smile stretched across her face and she began to insist on a response.

"Sugu, would you teach me?"

"O, of course! We'll definitely train together!"

"We'll have to wait until after my muscles recover though."

Kazuto nodded, and Suguha smiled wholeheartedly. The thought of practicing kendo together once again made her so happy that tears were coming out from her eyes.

"Hey... Onii-chan... I..."

Although Suguha didn't understand why Kazuto had a renewed interest in kendo, she was still really happy, and wanted to also tell him about her new interest. However, she quickly changed her mind and swallowed the words she was going to say.

"Hm?"

"Err, I guess it should stay a secret for now."

"What's up with that!?"

The two of them dried off their heads and then returned to the main house through the back door. Her mother Midori always worked in the mornings, so Suguha and Kazuto took turns in preparing breakfast.

"I'm going to take a shower, Onii-chan do you have any plans for today?"

"Ah...today, I'm... I'm going to the hospital..."

"..."

Suguha's high spirits suddenly sank as she heard his quiet response.

"I see, you're going to visit that person."

"Ah... that's the only thing I can do at this point."

That person was the most important one to him in that other world, and Suguha heard this directly from him a month ago. At the time, Suguha was in Kazuto's room; the two sat next to each other, and Kazuto was nursing a cup of coffee as he explained all the details. The Suguha from before would never have believed it possible that someone could fall in love in a virtual world. But now, she could somehow understand. Besides—whenever Kazuto spoke of that person, tears would always well up in his eyes.

Kazuto said that they were together until the very last moment. The two of them were definitely going to return to the real world together. But while Kazuto's consciousness awoke, that person only kept on sleeping. Nothing happened— or maybe something did happen and nobody knew about it. Ever since then, as long as he had time, Kazuto would go visit the hospital every three days to see that person.

Suguha could see it clearly. Kazuto, sitting in front of that sleeping person, holding her hand just like she once held his, calling out to them tirelessly. As soon as she visualized that image, a feeling that couldn't be described floated to the top of her heart. Her chest tightened painfully, and every breath felt difficult. She hugged herself tightly with both hands and directly sat down at where she was.

She wanted Kazuto to keep on smiling. Since he returned from that world, Kazuto had become a lot more open than before. He began to talk more with Suguha. He even got gentler and no longer made any unreasonable demands. It felt like they've returned to their childhood days. Therefore she realized just how important that person was when she saw her brother's tears. At that point she began to persuade herself.

––But, I've, I've already realized...

As Kazuto closed his eyes to reminisce about that person, Suguha felt like her heart could not stop hurting, as if she was trying desperately to hide another feeling.

As she watched Kazuto pour milk into a glass on the table and then gulp it down, Suguha whispered to herself within her heart.

––Hey, Onii-chan. I, I already know.

The siblings of before had now become cousins; yet even Suguha did not understand how it ended up like this.

But something did change. Although she hadn't really thought about it up until now, a small secret continued to flicker within her heart.

Maybe it's possible that she liked Onii-chan; but if it's like this, then that was probably fine.

* * *

After my bath, I changed my clothes and left on the bike that I had just bought about a month ago. By bicycle, the 15 kilometers to my destination was quite some distance, but the burden was just right for the still-recovering me.

My journey took me to a recently built hospital on the outskirts of Tokorozawa City, Saitama Prefecture.

The top ward of the hospital, was where she quietly lay.

Two months ago, atop the 75th floor of «Aincrad», I had defeated the final boss «Holy Sword» Heathcliff, and by so doing completed that death game. Afterwards, I awoke in a hospital room. Coming to, I found myself returned to the real world.

But she, my partner, my most important person, Asuna the «Flash», had not.

There wasn't much difficulty in inquiring about her. Immediately after regaining consciousness in a Tokyo hospital, I left the hospital room, wandering about with unstable steps, and was soon discovered by nurses who brought me back. Tens of minutes later, a single man in a suit rushed to pay me a visit as he gasped for air. He declared himself a representative of the «Ministry of Internal Affairs — SAO Countermeasures Division».

The organization of that grand name seemed to be formed immediately after the outbreak of the SAO incident, but in those two years, there was nothing they could do. However, that was unavoidable as well. If they had carelessly dabbled with the server, without cancelling the protection program made by programmer Kayaba Akihiko, the mastermind of this incident, ten thousand people would have had their brains destroyed. No one wanted such responsibility.

Regrouping, they made preparations to better observe the status of the victims laying in the hospital. Their one hope — a tiny light, but an immense task — was to survey player information through server data.

They so came to follow my progress on the frontlines, taking into account my level, position, and role as a vital player in the «Capture Group» trying to complete Sword Art Online. Therefore, when SAO players awoke all over the country, Ministry agents had rushed to my room, hoping to better understand what had just happened.

I revealed my conditions to the government official with the black rim spectacles who came into my sight. I would tell them all I knew. In exchange, they were to tell me what I wanted to know.

The thing I desired to know was of course Asuna's whereabouts. After a few minutes on the phone, the spectacled man turned and spoke, confusion naked on his face.

"Yuuki Asuna has been admitted to another medical institution in Tokorozawa. However, she has not awakened ... and not only her, 300 others across the country have yet to wake up either."

Initially they thought that this was simply the result of a lag spike occurring in the server. However, hours had turned to days as Asuna and the others had yet to wake.

Whether or not the plot of the missing Akihiko Kayaba still continued caused a great disturbance around the world, but my views ran contrary. I still remember the destruction of Aincrad, shrouded in the red setting sun.

He had certainly said it. He would release all surviving players. Moreover, by then he no longer had any reason to lie. He had definitely let himself disappear along with that world, this I wholeheartedly believe.

However, be it an unforeseen incident or in accordance with someone's will, the SAO server, which should have been completely formatted/reset, continued operation. Asuna's Nerve Gear was no exception, binding her soul within its depths. What went on deep within, I had not a clue, but if...if...if I could return to that world just once more—

If Suguha knew what I did then, she would have been furious. Leaving a note, I entered my room put my Nerve Gear on and started the SAO client. Surely enough, however, an error message coldly appeared before my eyes, «Error: Cannot connect to server».

Once my rehabilitation was complete, my freedom of movement had been restored, and from then until now, I had been periodically paying Asuna visits.

That was an extremely tough time. The feeling of something more important than anything else being unreasonably snatched away from me was far more painful than any physical or mental injury. Even moreso to the current me, powerless as a child.

Continuing the 40 minute trip, pedaling at a slow pace, I got off the main road and turned onto a winding, hilly road. Soon, an enormous building appeared before me. It was a privately managed, state of the art, medical institution.

The security guard at the entrance, now a familiar face, didn't bother to ask my reason for coming. I parked my bicycle in a corner of the huge parking lot. At the first floor reception desk, which bore the appearance of a high class hotel lobby, I was issued a visitor's pass. I clipped it to my chest and got on the elevator.

In several seconds, I reached the top floor, the 18th, and the door slowly opened. I walked south down the empty corridor. This floor had many long-term in-patients, but seeing others here was a rare occurrence. Finally, at the end of the corridor, a pale green door came into sight. There was a dull nameplate on the wall next to the door.

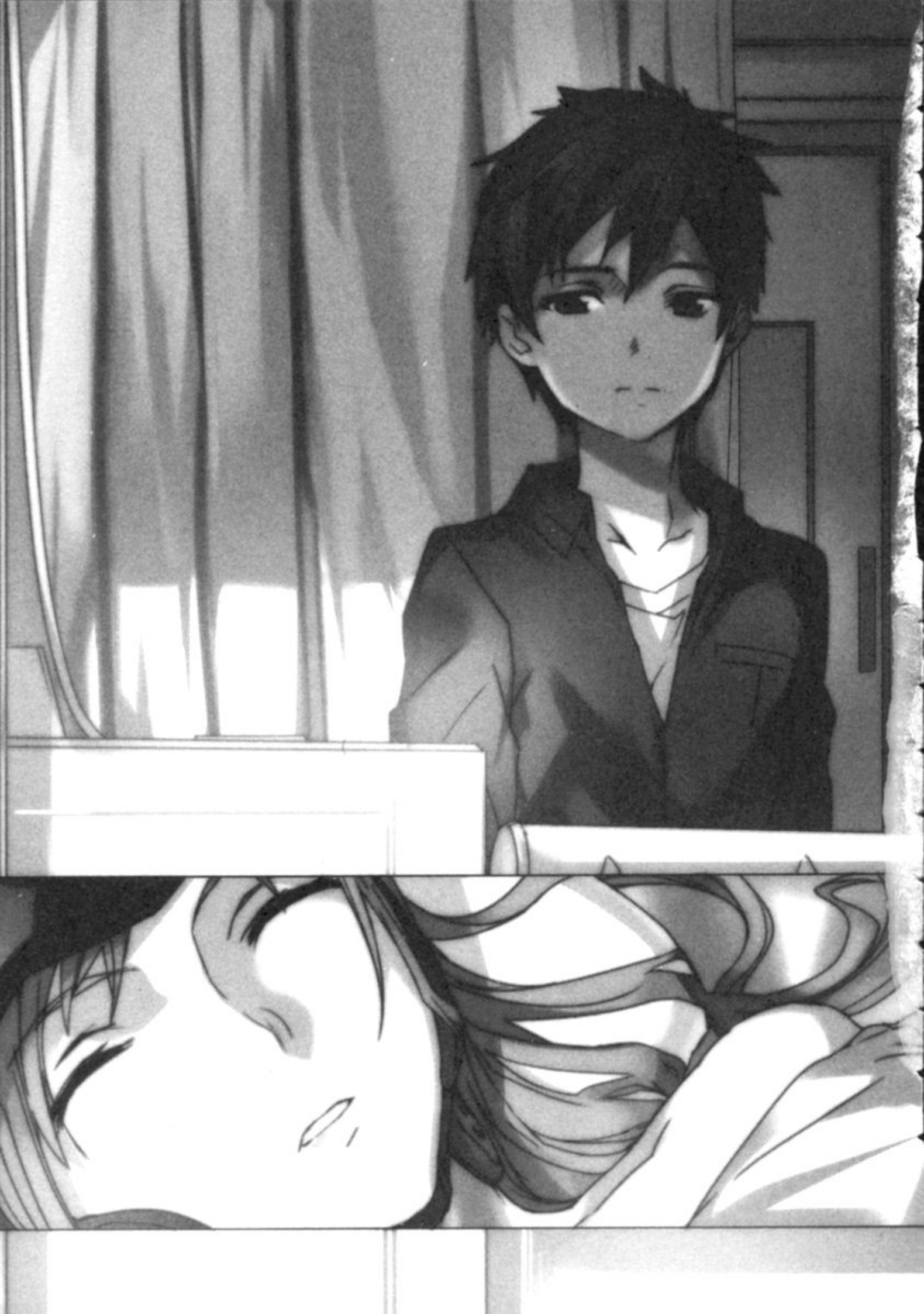
«Yuuki Asuna», below that display was a thin slit, which I was running toward. I unclipped the pass from my chest and slid its lower edge in the silt. The door slid open with a faint electronic sound.

Stepping into the room, I was enveloped by the refreshing fragrance of flowers. Fresh flowers at odds with the winter season decorated the room. The interior of the spacious hospital room was partitioned with curtains, which I slowly entered.

"Please let her wake up—" I touched the cloth, praying for a miracle and gently pulled the curtains apart.

A high-end intensive care unit was similar to the one I'd been in – even the mattress was the same. Sunlight gleamed off the white covers, falling gently on Asuna's face. If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought that she was simply sleeping.

When I first visited, I'd had this thought: would she disapprove of me seeing her this way? Such worries had since faded away. She really was too beautiful.



Her beautiful deep chestnut-colored hair, rippled like water on the white mattress around her; her translucent white skin, with a tinge of rose in her cheeks.

From her neck to her clavicle, her features looked exactly the same as they did in that world. Light cherry colored lips. Long eyelashes, trembling as if they'd open at any moment. If it weren't for that helmet, that is.

Nerve Gear. Its three, pale, flashing LED lights were twinkling like stars, evidence of its continued operation. Even now, her soul is still trapped in some world. I took her small right hand with both of mine, feeling her warmth. The feeling of her firm grip felt just the same as before. I held my breath, desperately trying to hold back tears as I cried...

"Asuna..."

The ringing of her alarm clock returned me to reality. Without me realizing, it had already become noon.

"I should go, Asuna. I'll come again soon."

I was then alerted to the sound of the doors sliding open, and I turned my attention to the two men entering the ward.

"Oh, Kirigaya-kun. I apologize for this disturbance."

An older man stood before him with a calm facial expression, returning the card in his hand to his pocket. From his physique and appearance, he looked to be a spirited and confident man, but sported grey hair that was the result of two years of worrying about his daughter. This was Asuna's father, Yuuki Shouzou. I had learned from Asuna previously that her father was an entrepreneur, but that did nothing to curtail my surprise upon learning he was the CEO of the electronics company «RECTO».

I bowed my head slightly and spoke.

"Hello. Sorry to interrupt, Yuuki-san."

"It's nothing, it's nothing. Having you always come here like this, I should be the one apologizing. I'm sure that child would also be most pleased."

He walked to Asuna's pillow, absently stroking her hair as he gazed sadly at Asuna's face. A moment later, he introduced me to the man standing behind him.

"This is someone new. He's the director of our research institute, Sugou-kun."

My first impression of him was a positive one. He was tall, wearing a dark gray suit, with a pair of yellow framed glasses balanced on the bridge of his nose. His eyes hid behind its thin lenses, and his perpetual smile completed the image. I imagined he was barely past his 30s.

He stretched out his hand and said:

"It's nice to meet you. I am Sugou Nobuyuki. You must be that hero Kirigaya-kun."

"Kirigaya Kazuto. Nice to meet you."

I shook Sugou's hand and turned my head to glance in Yuuki Shouzou's direction, his hand supporting his slightly down-turned head.

"About that, sorry. SAO's servers have already been shut down. This incident is almost like something you'd see on TV. He's my most trusted son. For some time now, he hasn't had contact with the family."

"President, this matter is—"

Sugou loosened his hand, turning to Shouzou to speak.

"Next month, I want to clearly tell everyone."

"Is that so? But is it really ok? You're still quite young, your life has barely begun..."

"My mind is made up. I want to take advantage of this time when Asuna is still beautiful...and have her wear a bridal gown."

"It seems that you have thought this through."

"With that, I take my leave. See you again Kirigaya-kun."

He nodded his head, turned around and walked out the door, closing the door behind him. The only males left in the room were Sugou and I.

Sugou Nobuyuki slowly moved to the bedside, standing opposite to me. He stroked Asuna's chestnut hair, making noises as his left hand trailed through her hair. It filled me with a sense of disgust.

"When you were in the game, you lived with Asuna, didn't you?" Nobuyuki-san said.

"...uhm.."

"In that case, our relationship might be slightly complicated."

Sugou looked up, and we made eye contact. At that moment, I realized that my impression of this man couldn't have been further from the truth.

Through his thin glasses, his small pupils gave one the impression of sanpaku[6], lips curled in a smile. These together gave off a feeling of cold callousness. Cold sweat ran down my back.

"About what I just said..."

Sugou gave off a bored smile.

"That is, Asuna's marriage to me."

I couldn't utter a word. What did he just say? Sugou's remark enveloped my body like a burst of cold. After a few moments of dead silence, I managed to spit out, "Do you think I'd possibly let you get away with that?"

"Oh, most certainly. To receive her approval in this sort of circumstance would be quite impossible. On paper, I'm an adopted son of the Yuuki family. In reality, however, she's hated me for some time now."

Sugou's fingers neared Asuna's lips.

"Stop!"

I subconsciously grabbed Sugou's hand, pulling him away from Asuna's face.

Shouting now, I screamed, "You bastard...you dare exploit Asuna's condition?!"

"Exploit? No no, this is well within limits. Honestly, Kirigaya-kun. Do you know what happened to SAO's company, «Argus»?"

"I heard they broke up."

"Correct. Development costs, along with the damages all put them in debt, and the company eventually went bankrupt. Therefore, the SAO server

maintenance is now under the responsibility of RECTO's FullDive technology department. Specifically, my department."

From the other side of the bed, Sugou turned to look at me. Revealing a demonic smile, he inched nearer to Asuna's cheek.

"That is to say, she is still alive because I permit it. Therefore, don't you think I should be compensated for my troubles? Am I wrong?"

Hearing this only strengthened my conviction.

This man wanted to exploit Asuna's situation, to use her life to fulfill his ambitions.

Turning and standing, looking contemptuously at me, the smile disappeared from his face. In any icy tone, he spoke once more.

"I don't know what happened between you and Asuna in the game, but I want you out of her life from now on. I hope you don't make any future contact with Yuuki and her family."

I clenched my fists, angry at my inability to do anything. I felt so helpless.

Several moments of silence passed by. Then, Sugou said with a mocking tone:

"The wedding ceremony will be held next week right here in this very ward. I hope you'll come. Cherish this last meeting of yours, Hero-kun"

I wanted a sword. I'd pierce his heart, slice his neck. I don't know if he felt some sense of my inner turmoil, but he patted my shoulder, turned and curtly left the room.

When I got home, the memory of our encounter still burned fresh in my mind. I lay on my bed and stared at the wall in a stupor.

"That is, Asuna's marriage to me."

"She is still alive because I permit it."

My meeting with Sugou played over and over in my head, like a movie stuck in a loop. My heart felt like a red hot lump of twisted metal.

But–– This all might just have been because a strong sense of self-consciousness.

Sugou is the person who has always been the closest to the Yuuki family. This was also the reason he was able to become Asuna's fiancé. Trusted deeply by Yuuki Shouzou, he also held great responsibility in RECTO. Asuna was probably arranged to marry this man long before we met in Aincrad. Compared to him, our time together was probably nothing more than an illusion. The indignity of having to give Asuna over to that man's whims, which were at best, like the caprice of a small child.

To us, the floating city of Aincrad was the real world. The vows we had exchanged there, the words, all glittered with the brilliance of a gem.

"I want to remain by Kirito's side forever––"

Asuna's words and smile slowly slipped away.

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry, Asuna...I...can't do anything..."

Tears of sadness slid down my face, potsu, potsu, onto the top of my clenched fist.

* * *

"Onii-chan, the bathroom's free!"

Suguha yelled at Kazuto's room, located on the second floor, but there was no response.

That evening, after returning from the hospital, Kazuto had locked himself in his room, not coming down even for dinner.

Suguha placed her hand on the doorknob, but hesitated. If he hadn't gone straight to sleep then perhaps he'd caught a cold, she reasoned, adding strength as she turned the handle.

Kacha~. The door opened revealing a darkened room.

He must be sleeping, she thought, and as she turned to leave the room, a gust of cold air blew in, making her shiver. The windows seemed to be open. There really doesn't seem to be any other way, she thought, shaking her head.

She tip-toed softly across the room, making her way toward the window...only to find her brother curled up on the bed, wide awake.

"Ah, Onii-chan, I'm sorry. I thought you were asleep," was Suguha's bewildered response.

After a few moments of silence, Kazuto replied in a voice devoid of emotion, "Sorry, but could you leave me alone?"

"But, but, the room was so cold..."

Suguha reached out and took Kazuto's hands in her own. They felt as cold as ice.

"This isn't good. Your hands are frozen; you'll catch a cold like this. Hurry up and take a shower."

Some light filtered in through the curtains from a street-lamp, alighting on Kazuto's face. At this moment, Suguha understood something had happened to her brother.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

His reply was but a choked whisper.

"But..."

Without waiting for her to finish, he buried his face in his hands. Hiding himself from Suguha, and with a hint of self-loathing, he said, "I really am useless. It wasn't so long ago that I swore to never again say such defeatist words..."

Halfway through his words, Suguha had already understood what had happened. Speaking in a trembling, quiet voice, she asked, "That person...Asuna-san...just what happened?"

Kazuto's body tensed. In a low voice, filled with pain, he answered, "Asuna...has gone somewhere...somewhere far. A place...where my hands can't reach her... "

This time it was made clear to her. Watching Kazuto, crying like a child in front of her, Suguha's heart was touched.

She closed the window, drew the curtains, turned on the air conditioner, and sat down at his side. She hesitated for a moment, before taking his cold hands in hers again. Kazuto's curled body relaxed in an instant.

Suguha whispered in his ear.

"Cheer up. If she really is the person you love, you shouldn't give up so easily. "

These words did not come easily, and speaking them, her heart felt like it had been cut with a sword. A feeling from deep within her heart gave rise to this pain. I like Kazuto onii-chan, was the feeling that strongly came to Suguha at this time.

––Me too. I can't lie to myself anymore.

Suguha supported her brother, gently lowering him onto his bed. Taking hold of his bed-covers, she tenderly pulled them over his body.

How long she held him, she didn't know, but Kazuto's muffled cries had become the peaceful sound of sleep. Suguha closed her eyes, her heart quietly whispering to itself.

—My only choice is to give up. All I can do is bury this feeling, deep, deep within.

Because within Kazuto's heart, she's already there.

Tears silently flowed down Suguha's cheeks, then onto the bed-covers, before quickly disappearing entirely.

* * *

My sweet, gentle sleep was broken by a sudden burst of warmth.

I wasn't yet fully awake, but there was an odd warmth floating over me, like sunlight through tree branches, caressing my cheek.

I kept my eyes closed and embraced the girl sleeping next to me. We were close enough for me to feel her breath, so I opened my eyes a little to—

"Uwwah!?"

I uttered a cry, and jumped back about fifty centimeters. My body sprung up to a sitting position, and quickly looked around.

This is what I've always seen in my dreams. Aincrad, twenty-second floor of the forest home – impossible. Parts of reality are here, my room and my bed. However, apart from me, there is another person.

I was speechless. Fully awake, I quickly got up and set the blanket back in place. With her short black hair, her prominent eyebrows, Suguha lay in her pajamas, asleep on my pillow.

"How...how is this..."

After some careful thinking, I finally remembered what happened last night. That's right, last night after returning from the hospital, it seems I had some words with Suguha. Amid despair and pain which had brought me to tears, she'd comforted me, and eventually, I'd fallen asleep.

"Honestly, just like a child."

After feeling a bit shameful, I looked over at Suguha, fast asleep. She shouldn't be doing this.

I suddenly remembered that something similar to this happened in 'that' world. Suguha is very similar to that beast tamer girl I encountered around the fortieth floor. She, too, crept into my bed, which gave me similar troubles.

I smiled as I remembered. My encounter with Asuna and Sugou Nobuyuki continued to fill me with concern, but the piercing pain in my heart slowly disappeared last night.

My memories in that world – the floating city of Aincrad – are important treasures to me. Happy memories, sad memories — too many to count — but all of those memories are real, and I will not treat them otherwise, including the agreement between Asuna and I to meet together in this world once again. There must be something I can do.

Just as I was thinking that, from before me, Suguha's murmured sleep-talk entered my ears.

"Giving up...is not allowed..."

"What you said is absolutely right," I whispered back. Then, sitting up, I poked Suguha's face with my finger.

"Hey, wake up. It's morning already."

"Hmmph."

She let out a dissatisfied groan. I reached under the blankets and pinched her cheeks.

"Get up, it's already pretty late."

Suguha finally opened her eyes.

"Ah. Good morning, Onii-chan," she mumbled, as she lazily climbed up out of the blankets.

Then, she looked at me with surprise and quickly glanced around the room. Her half-closed, sleepy eyes suddenly opened wide and her cheeks flushed red.

"Ah! Um, I..."

Her ears turned red, her body stiff, and she suddenly jumped up and ran from the room as fast as she could.

"Honestly."

I shook my head and stood up to open the window, taking a deep breath of cold air to drive the fatigue away.

«News» arrived as I grabbed a change of clothes to take a bath.

There was an electronic-sounding tone and I could see the e-mail alert flashing, so I sat down and played around with the EL terminal.

Since the past two years I've been asleep, the computer's structure has undergone many changes. The nice, old HDD (Hard Disk Drive) disappeared without a trace, and was replaced with the more modern SSD (Solid Storage Drive), which has become the new standard and does not produce ultra-high volatile MRAM. There is no lag time during transfer; it happens instantaneously. The e-mail sent has been updated, and the name under 'sender' is «Agil».

On the 50th floor of the main block of Aincrad lived Agil, the owner of the grocery store in 'Algade.' We'd met for the first time on the 20th in Tokyo and exchanged e-mail addresses, but this would be our first time actually contacting one another. The message title read, "LOOK AT THIS." When I opened it, there was no text, only a single attached image.

I scrolled down and opened the picture on the monitor, then stared closely at the image being displayed.

The composition was incredible. You could see from the characteristic color and light that it was obviously not the real world but rather a computer generated, illusionary world. In the picture's foreground stood a golden cage with a white table and a white chair. A girl, draped in a white gown sat within. Looking carefully through the cage at her face—

"Asuna!?"

The image was very rough, but that girl, with her long chestnut hair was undoubtedly Asuna, her face desolate and her hands folded on the table. A closer look showed transparent wings stretched out behind her.

I grabbed the phone off the table, and hurriedly dialed in the number I found in the phone book. The ringing must have lasted but a few seconds, but it felt like hours. Finally, the line connected and a deep voice answered the phone.

"Hello—"

"Hey!! What was that picture all about!?"

"Look, Kirito, at least introduce yourself first ."

"I don't have the time! Hurry up and tell me!!"

"It's a long story. Can you come over?"

"Right away. I'll be there right away."

Not bothering to wait for a reply, I hung up the phone and grabbed a change of clothes. I have never showered, dried my hair and worn my shoes so quickly in my life, and in no time I was on my bike heading out. Nor has this road ever seemed so long, even though I have used it countless times.

Agil's café and bar business is located in Taito Okachimachi. I soon saw the black dashboard and metal sign decorated with two dice, thus the name, «Dicey Café».

I opened the door and was met with the ringing sound of the bell on the door. The bald man at the counter looked up at me and laughed. Not a customer to be seen.

"Oh, you're quite fast."

"Business is poor as usual. Just how on earth did it survive these last two years?"

"Sure it's slow now, but it picks up during the night."

The lighthearted conversation calms me a little, as if I were back in that world.

Our meeting was something that had happened at the end of last month. At the time, I'd received the real names and addresses of certain players from members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Klein, Nishida, Silica, and Lisbeth, among others. Even though there were many players I wanted to see again, but they'd all returned to the real world, and keeping in touch was a difficult thing. The first place I visited would be this store.

"So, what is it you want me to tell you!?"

The store's owner looked a little unhappy.

His real name is Andrew Gilbert Mills. I find it awesome that he runs a shop in the real world as well.

Although African-American by ethnicity, his parents took a liking to Japan, and he opened his coffee shop-bar here, in Okachimachi at the age of 25. Moreover, from among his customers, he'd found a beautiful, virtuous wife. Afterwards, he too, had been trapped in the world of SAO for two years. Upon returning, the shop he'd fully expected to have closed long ago had been saved by his wife's efforts. Truly a touching story.

To be truthful, it's odd that there weren't many customers. The shop had a compact layout, with but four chairs and a counter, a bright and colorful place that was both attractive and relaxing.

I sat on a leather stool, ordered a cup of coffee and started questioning Agil about the picture.

"So, what's the deal with that picture?"

The store's manager didn't answer right away. Instead, I watched as he brought out a rectangular package from under the counter, and pushed it to me.

The packaging was clearly that of game software. I took particular notice of the clear print «Amusphere» on the upper right corner.

"I haven't heard of this kind of hardware before."

"«AmuSphere». It came out while we were still in that world. It's the next generation of FullDive technology, Nerve Gear's successor."

As I looked at the logo with mixed feelings, Agil gave a simple explanation.

After the incident, Nerve Gear was dubbed 'a devil's machine', and so no manufacturer dared to involve themselves in the FullDive genre of gaming technology. However, 6 months after the SAO incident, a new company was founded, with a slogan of "absolute security." It released the Nerve Gear successor models, and as we were trapped in Aincrad at the time, we had no knowledge of this.

That helped me understand the situation a little better, but because I didn't pay too much attention to games following what had happened, I still didn't have a clear understanding of things.

"So, this is a VRMMO as well?"

I held it in my hand and carefully inspected it. The picture showed a deep forest with the full moon hanging high, in front of it a girl clad in fantasy garb. Sword in hand, she flew through the sky on a pair of transparent wings. Below the illustration, a heading – «ALfheim Online».

"ALfheim...Online? What does that mean?"

"Just as the name sounds. It means 'Elf Home.'"

"Elf? I'm still a little unclear. This game isn't very serious, is it?"

"That, huh, maybe so. I've heard it's quite difficult, though."

Agil placed a steaming cup of coffee in front of me, laughing. I raised up the cup, enjoying the fragrance, as I continued to question him.

"What's the difficulty like?"

"The SKILL system is on Extreme, and the game focuses on the player's skills. PKing is encouraged."

"Extreme...?"

"«Levels» don't exist anymore in this game. All skills will only increase in level through repetition. The battle system relies on the player's athletic ability, instead of Sword Skills like in SAO. But regardless of these minor differences, the technology is pretty much the same as SAO."

"Ah. That does sound pretty impressive."

I let out an appreciative whistle. The creation of Floating City Aincrad had taken the full efforts of that mad genius Akihiko Kayaba. That someone else could create a VR world of the same degree is a little hard to believe.

"PKing is encouraged?"

"At creation, players can select from a variety of fairy races, and it is only between opposing races that this is possible."

"That's ridiculously difficult. Regardless of the high level of technology, it feels more like it was made for fanatic gamers. I doubt it would be very popular," I said with a frown.

As Agil listened to me, he dropped his serious look and smiled.

"I used to think that way too, but now I'm thinking it'll be very popular with the current crowd, the main reason being that in this game, you have the ability to «Fly»."

"Fly...?"

"With fairy wings. Unlike previous games, the controller is equipped with a flight engine, enabling users to fly freely."

I've never thought on the possibilities of flight before. After Nerve Gear was developed, many VR flying games were developed, but those were all controlled through vehicular control. Flight through human means was not introduced simply because the player would have no experience flying and therefore be unable to control the power of flight.

In these imaginary worlds, the things a player can do are the same as those you can do in the real world. Conversely, those things that real world humans can't do here, they can't do there either. Sprouting wings is no difficult task, but the muscle movement associated with moving said wings isn't nearly as simple.

In SAO, Asuna and I had incredible jumping ability, through which we could imitate flight, but this and free flight are still inherently worlds apart.

"This whole concept of flying is amazing and all, but how exactly does it work?"

"Who knows, but it's gotta be real troublesome. For starters, you have to operate it with a one-hand joystick controller."

"..."

All of a sudden, I had the desire to challenge this game, but it immediately left me, and I returned to sipping my coffee.

"Alright. I have a broad idea of what the game's like now. Back to the main topic, what's the case with this picture?"

Agil brought a piece of paper out from under the counter, placing it in front of me. It was specifically for photos.

"What do you see?"

After hearing his question, I stared at the picture for a bit, before finally answering.

"So similar...to Asuna..."

"Figures you'd think the same way. It's a game screenshot, the resolution is pretty bad."

"Hurry up and explain."

"That's a screenshot from this game, ALfheim Online."

Agil handed me the game and pictures. There was a screenshot of the game, with an overview of the world map as well as territories, and in the central area was a giant tree.

"This is the World Tree, or Yggdrasil."

Agil pointed to the tree.

"The goal of players is to be the first race to reach the city atop this tree."

"Are you not allowed to simply fly up, then?"

"Regardless of how much endurance and stamina they have for flight, it's not without limits. To even reach the lowest of these branches is already impossible. However, there are still people who come up with crazy ideas,

such as a group of five people who use their flight like a multi-stage rocket that propels themselves up."

"Hahaha, is that so. Even if you call it a crazy idea, it's still quite creative."

"Ah, apparently it was a success. However, the branches were very weak, and so their accomplishment can only be regarded as so much. To prove that they managed to do this, they took a lot of photos as evidence. One of them was of a cage hanging from a huge tree branch."

"Birdcage..."

My words carried with them an indescribable feeling, which caused my brow to furrow. To be trapped...this thought immediately entered my mind.

"This photograph was taken just as they reached it."

"But why is Asuna there?"

I picked up the game again, and stared at it.

I focused on the print on the bottom of the box. «RECTO Progress».

"What's the matter, Kirito? Your face is a little pale."

"Nothing... No other pictures? For example, «others from SAO», besides Asuna, who have yet to return?"

At my question, the manager frowned deeply and shook his head.

"No, though I've heard things to that effect. But these pictures from «ALfheim Online» can't be used to explain anything. Don't go cry wolf just because of this."

"Yeah, I know."

I looked down, thinking of what that man — Sugou Nobuyuki — had said to me.

The manager of the SAO's servers was now him, he had definitely said. Speaking of which, he'd mentioned that the servers were like a black box, and couldn't be manipulated externally. At the time, it'd made sense to me.

However, if Asuna continued to sleep, this would be quite favorable for him. Moreover, a girl who looked just like Asuna was trapped in a VRMMO

designed by none other than a RECTO subsidiary. There's no way it's just coincidence.

I considered contacting the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but immediately changed my mind. My concerns would be too vague, and I had no concrete evidence.

I looked up, facing him.

"Agil, can I have this?"

"No problem...You want to go take a look?"

"Yes, I want to confirm this myself."

For the first time, Agil let himself show a doubtful expression. We both understood the dangers of VR.

I shrugged my arms, and laughed.

"I guess if I want to try this I'll have to buy the new console."

"Nerve Gear can run it as well. AmuSphere is simply a version with enhanced performance."

"That's really great."

I shrugged. Agil let out a slight smile.

"Well, this isn't the first time you've rescued someone who's trapped in her own consciousness."

"It does not matter how many times she is trapped or imprisoned or how many times I have to do this."

And that was it. Asuna and I hadn't had any other contact except through the Internet via Nerve Gear. Neither voice nor letter had I received.

But those days of waiting were over. Finishing my coffee in one go, I stood. Agil's counter was old fashioned, similar to his shop in SAO, completely devoid of any electronic cash registers and the like. I fished out several coins and placed them on the counter.

"Then I'll head back now. Thank you for having me, and for the information."

"You can pay me back in other ways for the information. You must rescue Asuna, so we can finally put an end to all of this."

"That's right. One day, this will be over."

I hit my palm with my fist. Then I opened the door, and left.

* * *

Suguha lay on her bed, before rolling over to bury her face in her pillow, kicking her bed for a few minutes.

It was already noon, but she was still wearing pajamas. Today is Monday, January 20th, and winter vacation is already over, but Suguha, in her third semester of her third year of middle school can attend as she likes. For that reason, she attends only to show her face at her kendo club.

Right now her mind was replaying that memory over and over, and she had already lost track of how many times it had repeated. Last night — in order to warm the frozen Kazuto, she'd burrowed under the covers with him, their bodies inseparably close before falling asleep together. It had taken a mere ten seconds before sleep came, and her weak constitution was now a cause for regret.

"...I'm an idiot! Idiot! Idiot!" she screamed inwardly as she pounded on her pillow with her fists.

At least I could have woken up before him and slipped out, but he woke up first, how can I even look at him now?

Her feelings of shame and embarrassment mixed with her hidden feelings of love, and the stabbing pain in her chest refused to let her breathe. She covered her face with her hands, and suddenly realized that her pajamas still held her brother's scent, causing another deep throb within her heart.

Anyway, swinging a shinai will wipe it all away, she determined, rising to her feet. In her nervousness, she wasn't sure if it was better to wear her dogi, or casual clothes, but she quickly changed and went into the courtyard to practice.

Kazuto was out somewhere today — she didn't know where exactly, and her mother, Midori, always left for work before noon. Her father, Minetaka, had returned to America just after the new year, leaving Suguha alone at

home. From the stand on the first floor breakfast table, she grabbed a cheese muffin, stuffing it in her mouth in an extremely unladylike gesture, while her other hand grabbed a pouch of orange juice, before sitting briefly in the hallway.

Just as she'd taken a huge bite, Kazuto appeared in the entrance hall, pushing his bike and catching her gaze.

"Guu!!"

A piece of the muffin lodged in her throat, and she frantically waved her right hand to drink from her juice — only to realize the straw was missing.

"Uahh, guu~~!"

"Oi oi"

Kazuto ran to Suguha's side, grabbing the juice and quickly inserting the straw before holding it to her mouth. Desperately sucking in the cold liquid, she was finally able to swallow the trapped piece of food.

"Uah! Dead...This time I thought I was dead for sure."

"What an impatient girl! Don't you know you should eat a little more slowly?"

"Mmm ~"

Embarrassed, she lowered her head to look at her feet. Kazuto sat down beside her, bent down and began to untie his shoelaces. In Suguha's peripheral vision, she watched Kazuto's profile, once again biting her muffin. At just that moment, he suddenly spoke,

"Right, Sugu, about last night..."

Suguha suddenly choked, and hurriedly drank a mouthful of juice.

"Y-Yes?"

"So um, that is...Thank you!"

"Eh...?"

Hearing these unexpected words, Suguha could only stare at Kazuto.

"Thanks to you, my spirit has been restored. I, won't give up. I'll definitely save her, and bring her to meet you."

Suguha, enduring the pain in her heart, smiled and answered, "Mm. Do your best! I, too, would like to meet Asuna-san."

"You two would get along very well."

Kazuto patted Suguha on the head and then stood.

"So, see you later."

With that, Kirito started to run up to the second floor, and seeing him go past, Suguha popped the last bit of her muffin into her mouth.

––Do your best...to me too...?

Reaching the pool in the courtyard, Suguha began suburi[7]. Holding her shinai, she began to move in what could almost be called a dance, and slowly began to warm up her body.

In the past, swinging her shinai was all she needed to clear her mind, but today was decidedly different. What was on her mind seemed impossible to erase, and was now firmly entrenched in place.

––Me liking Onii-chan...is that really ok?

Last night, because of such thoughts, she'd already determined to give up. Deep within Onii-chan's heart is only that person; this she clearly understood, but that did nothing for the pain.

––But...maybe it's better this way.

She was divided, conflicted even, unclear as to why she had become so conscious of Kazuto. She, however, was very clear as to when it had begun.

Two months prior, her mother was contacted by the hospital, and she flew to the hospital without a moment's hesitation, to lean by Kazuto's side, eyes brimming with tears and smile bright with gladness. Kazuto reached out his hand, responding with a nostalgic tone. Beginning with that moment, a feeling began to sprout in Suguha's heart. I want to be closer to him, I want to speak more with him, I want to throw myself at him, but this, of course, could not be.

Just staying by his side and watching him is fine as well, Suguha assured herself, as she began swinging her shinai once more. She lost herself in

practice and didn't realize how much time had passed until she stopped to look at the clock, only to see that noon had already crept upon her.

"Ah, I can't go on like this. I've got someone to meet."

Ceasing her empty swings, she placed her shinai against the side of a nearby pine tree, and picked up her towel to wipe off her sweat. As she raised her head to gaze at the sky, the blue sky peeked through the clouds.

* * *

I went back to my room, changed, and turned my phone to vibrate. I sat on the bed and opened my backpack, and took out the game that Agil had given me.

«ALfheim Online».

I hadn't heard very much, so I read the information booklet. Originally, prior to playing a MMORPG, I would collect information through a number of magazines and forums, but this time I didn't even hesitate. I opened the game packaging and took out the ROM inside. I plugged the Nerve Gear router in, and inserted the ROM into its slot. After a few seconds, the main indicator light stopped flashing, turning solid instead.

Sitting by my bedside, I placed the Nerve Gear over my eyes with both hands.

The formerly shiny Nerve Gear was now slightly damaged, and paint was peeling in several places. For two years, it had been simultaneously my captor as well as an ever-reliable comrade-in-arms.

––Once again, please lend me strength.

With that in mind, I put the Nerve Gear on my head and buckled the chin strap. With the frame in place and the goggles down, I closed my eyes.

Anxiety and excitement caused my heart to beat rapidly, as I tried to slow my racing heartbeat, I said, "LINK START!"

The light passing through my closed eyelids suddenly disappeared. The transmission from my optic nerves was suddenly severed, and my eyes were enveloped by darkness.

Immediately, a rainbow-colored light appeared, and a shapeless «Nerve Gear» gradually formed into a logo. The images, which were initially hazy, were for the purpose of confirming the connection to my visual cortex. Eventually, a line of text appeared below the logo to confirm that the visual connection was OK.

Next came the sound test, and multiple strange sounds resonated. The sounds which were initially distorted slowly became beautiful and changed in pitch and harmony, before gradually decreasing in volume and eventually dying away. When this was complete, a line of text appeared to confirm that the auditory nerve connection was similarly OK.

The initial connection procedure continued. Now moving to the feeling of touch and gravity, the feeling of my bed and weight disappeared. As the connection tests continued with various senses, the number of OKs indicated the successful connection. If FULLDIVE technology had improved, then this process should be shortened dramatically, and all I could do was wait for it to finish.

At last, the final OK appeared, and the next instant brought me falling through the darkness into the colors of a rainbow, an illusion of the world. After passing through this series of rings, I had arrived in a different world.

––Actually, it's still a little early to say that. Out of the darkness emerged an account registration interface. The main ALfheim Online LOGO gradually appeared, accompanied by a soft female voice.

Following the instructions given, I began creating my account and character. At chest height was a pale and shiny virtual keyboard and I entered a User ID and password as prompted. I had many years of experience before beginning SAO, so this process was of some familiarity to me. Since this is a downloadable MMO game, I would normally need to select the payment method, but I had bought this game and it came with a one month free trial.

Next I chose the nickname for my character. I didn't put much thought into it, but entered the name «Kirito».

This name was a shortened form of my real name, Kirigaya Kazuto, and there weren't many who knew that. Those who understood included only

the rescue team from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and those with a close connection, i.e. RECTO's president Yuuki Shouzou and that Sugou. Of course, that also included Agil and Asuna, who had yet to wake. Even Suguha and our parents shouldn't know of it.

In the SAO incident, none of this information had been made public, especially character names. This was because in that world there was frequent fighting between players and the result was often a horrible death in the real world. If unrestricted publication of this information was allowed, it would not be difficult to imagine a large number of lawsuits being filed.

At the moment, the blame for the SAO killings was entirely placed on the head of Kayaba Akihiko, whose whereabouts are currently unknown. Relatives of players are still suing Argus for damages, the consequences of which have bankrupted said company. That is to say, while the company single-handedly supported by Kayaba voluntarily drew the curtain, the still unavoidable torrent of lawsuits was completely in line with the country's intentions.

With a bit of trepidation I realized the name was known to Sugou Nobuyuki, and because it is a rather well-known name I changed it from its romanized form to its kana form. My selected gender, of course, was male.

Then, the voice advised me to create my character. This is when the player can choose what their character will look like. The many parameters are randomly selected and the system doesn't explain how they can be changed. What bothered me was that an additional fee would be required to change my appearance. Whatever though, anything's fine.

There are nine different fairy races to choose from when deciding my character's role. Each race has its own strengths and weaknesses which can be explained before I need to choose. Salamanders, Sylphs and Gnomes are pretty common to RPGs, but Cait Siths and Leprechauns not so much.

I'm not planning on playing this game too seriously, so anything's fine with me. So because I liked its initial, black themed equipment, I selected the «Spriggan» and pressed OK.

After completing the initial setup, the artificial voice rang out saying "Good luck", I was again sent into the vortex of light. According to the voice, I was being sent to the hometown of my race, the Spriggans, as a starting point for the game. The sensation of the ground disappeared, to be replaced by

a floating feeling, then by the feeling of tumbling into a new world. Bright light marked the transition, and the new world gradually emerged and gained depth. I was falling toward a village from high above in the darkness.

After two months of time away from FullDive, the stimulation once again aroused my nerves. In this manner, I slowly approached the slender castle at the center of the town––

At that moment.

The scene before my eyes suddenly froze. Defects appeared here and there as some of the polygons disappeared, and a noise like lightning could be heard throughout the world. The resolution of all objects sharply declined, mosaic-like, and the world dissolved and collapsed altogether.

"W–What on earth!?"

Not even the sound of my cry could be heard–– I began fiercely plummeting once again. With no end to the vast darkness, I descended toward the ground in continuous free fall.

"What do I do now?! AHHHHHHHH!"

My screams were absorbed into the darkness of the void before gradually disappearing.

Chapter 2

A huge moon hung in the cloudless sky, the forest below shaded blue-green in the moon's light.

ALfheim's night is very short, but there's still some time before dawn. Normally, such a dark forest would be a cause for concern, but it's that same darkness which makes retreat possible.

Lyfa, hidden in the shadow of a giant tree, raised her head to look at the starry sky. For the moment, there doen't seem to be any ominous presences in the sky. Lowering her voice as much as possible, she spoke to her nearby teammate, "When your wings recover, we'll take off immediately. Prepare yourself."

"Ah— but I'm still dizzy..."

Her partner answered in a very reluctant tone.

"You're still feeling sick? Don't you feel embarrassed? You ought to get used to it."

"Even if you say that, scary things are still scary..."

Lyfa sighed with frustration.

Squatting next to the tree was a teenage player named Recon, also Lyfa's friend in real life. They had started playing ALO —ALfheim ONLINE— together. In other words, he and Lyfa have played this game for almost a year. However, no matter how much time passes, Recon was still unable to overcome the feeling of vertigo while flying. In ALO, strength in air combat is the only measurement that matters, but after only one or two scuffles, he would already be exhausted. This made him somewhat unreliable.

Even though Recon was like this, Lyfa didn't hate that part of him. Or rather, it was more like she just couldn't ignore this "little brother" of hers. His appearance often exposed a delicate body with bobbed yellow-green hair, long ears which hung down toward the ground, and an expression that made you think he was just about to burst into tears. Although it was randomly generated, his appearance in game bore a close resemblance to reality. When Lyfa first saw him in game, she couldn't help but break into laughter.

For Recon as well, Lyfa looked too much like her real appearance. As a Sylph, she had well-defined, very neat eyebrows, beautiful eyes, and a slightly large-boned body for a member of her race.

Originally she had wanted a character that would be considered more «Graceful». Her current appearance was not only in keeping with this desire, but could also be considered extremely cute. However, she could be considered fortunate. Many people were not so lucky, and in order to be satisfied with their appearance they chose to pay additional fees to reconstruct their character. Compared to these people, Lyfa had absolutely nothing to complain about.

The additional payment did not affect a character's performance at all, but Recon had played around with his eyes until they matched his sense of aesthetics; he'd thought their balance was off.

Lyfa held Recon's equipped Blest Armor from the back and pulled. She looked at his four transparent wings surrounded by a thin green phosphorescence, indicating that he could fly again.

"Well, you can fly again. It's time to fly out of this forest."

"Eh ~ we'll definitely get chased again. Let's rest for a bit. Rest~"

"Naive!! There's only one Salamander there who's any good. If we're careful, we won't be seen. Neither of us can afford another air battle, so just bite the bullet and fly!"

"Ohh..."

Recon reluctantly answered, holding his left hand up in the air. A translucent joystick —the remote control used for flight— appeared in his hand. The front-end held a small ball; this was ALO's assisted flight controller. As Recon pulled the controller toward himself, four wings extended to the sides, growing brighter as they lengthened.

After seeing this, Lyfa began extending her own wings, flapping them two or three times. She did not use the control stick. This was a high level skill called «Voluntary Flight», proof that the user was a first-class warrior in ALO.

"Well let's get out of here!!" Lyfa whispered.

As her wings fully extended themselves, she kicked off the ground, racing toward the moon. Her field of vision gradually widened until she saw all of ALfheim stretched out before her, offering the sense of endless freedom.

"Ah..."

Flying toward distant heights, Lyfa gave a cry of joy. What she felt now was irreplaceable. She let out a whoop. Since ancient times, man has had the desire to fly like a bird. This had finally become a reality in this fantasy world.

The flight time limit set by the system was the only thing that marred this experience. To fly as freely as the heart desires would be worth paying any price.

Originally, this was the wish of all players fighting in ALfheim: to reach the top of «Yggdrasil» before any of the other races and enter the legendary aerial city. There, one would transform into a real fairy, «ALF», lift the time limit on flight, and become the ruler of a truly infinite sky.

Lyfa had no desire to acquire rare items or increase her status. The reason she fought in this world was for just this one thing.

Lyfa aimed toward the full golden moon which had not quite set, using her glass-like wings. Particles of light scattered behind her like a comet dragging a green tail through the night sky.

"Ly, Lyfa-chan~ Waaaaait for me~"

—Weak sounds from below called Lyfa's attention back to reality. She stopped and looked down; clutching his controller, Recon was desperately chasing after her. The maximum flight speed is relatively low when using system assistance, and if Lyfa were serious, Recon would never be able to catch up.

"Hurry it up! Do your best!"

Lyfa spread her wings and hovered while waiting for Recon. Raising her head to look at her surroundings, in the distance, at the far end of a sea of trees, she saw Yggdrasil, towering above the darkness. From this fixed point, even the direction of Sylph territory can be more or less determined.

When Recon reached just about the same height, Lyfa matched his speed as they flew together.

Recon flying by her side, showed an expression of great reluctance and spoke, "High, somewhat too high, right?"

"You don't find the high altitude pleasing? If your wings are tired, we can always glide."

"The second she starts to fly, her personality changes..."

"What did you say?"

"No- no. Nothing!."

Recon quickly shut his mouth as they headed for the southwest area of ALfheim, that is, Sylph territory.

Earlier today, Lyfa had formed a party with four reliable, like-minded players and travelled to a dungeon area in the northeastern neutral territory. Fortunately, they were able to hunt without encountering any other teams, so the harvest was very fruitful, and they acquired a great deal of money and items. Upon preparing to return to Sylph territory, however, they were ambushed by a party of eight Salamanders.

There is fighting between different races in ALO, but it is uncommon to run into large groups of bandit players who band together and rob other players. Today's ambush was especially strange, considering it was a weekday afternoon in the real world. They didn't expect that they'd be attacked, particularly not on such a large scale... They'd been careless.

While fleeing, they had engaged twice in mid-flight team battles «AIR RAIDs», during which both sides had lost three men. They'd started off with fewer people, and now only Lyfa and Recon were left. Taking advantage of the fact that Sylphs' flight speed was greater than that of the Salamanders', they'd managed to avoid capture, and make headway toward Sylph territory. However, because of vertigo experienced during two consecutive battles, Recon became seriously disoriented and they had not been able to reach Sylph territory. Instead, they had hidden in the forest to give Recon time to recover. Just as Lyfa lost all sense of tension, and turned back to the forest behind her—

From underneath the side by side growth of dark green trees, flashed a point of orange light.

"Recon, dodge!!" Lyfa cried, swinging rapidly to the left. Immediately after, from the ground, three vicious lines of fire shot forth, passing through the gaps left by the leaves of the tree.

Fortunately, they were flying much higher, and the long trail of a fire-ray stopped just short of them, and disappeared into the night sky.

There wasn't any time to appreciate how close things had been, though. The attack magic released earlier from within the sea of trees caught the attention of the other pursuers, and five red and black shadows were rapidly approaching.

"Damn it, how stubborn!!"

Lyfa complained and looked northwest. She still had yet to catch a glimpse of the light of the Tower of Wind, standing in the center of Sylph land.

"There's no way around it! Get ready to fight!" Lyfa called, pulling a curved longsword from around her waist.

"Uwah, don't!"

Recon cried as he took out his daggers and positioned himself.

"There are five enemies. There is no way to win, but I won't give up so easily! If I pull out all the stops, I can take at least one with me."

"That really is the right way to look at it."

"Occasionally, I also want you to see my good side."

Recon moved his shoulders slightly. Lyfa's face tensed, and she assumed a diving posture. Tightening her body, she circled once before shooting downwards, her wings bent at a sharp angle. To the Salamanders, in V-formation, this move simply seems unplanned.

Even among veteran ALO players, online from the beginning, the experienced, well-equipped Lyfa has only suffered defeat for two reasons: numerical superiority and the recently devised Salamander formations. At the expense of mobility, they equip heavy armor and lances and take advantage of the extra weight to perform powerful thrusting attacks. Facing an onslaught of so many lances is like staring down a ferocious wave. The Sylphs' advantage is in their lightweight, agile movements, but for them to fight a protracted battle is difficult.

But Lyfa, having fought this enemy twice already today, roughly understood the flaw in their style. With courage born from desperation, Lyfa dove fearlessly at the vanguard of the enemy group. She closed the distance in practically no time, but all of her attention was focused on the razor sharp tip of the silver lance the enemy prepares to attack her with.

The Sylph's lunge issued a high-pitched screech even as the friction caused by the movement of the Salamander's gripped metal looses a discordant howl. The moment the two cross, the air rumbles in an explosive roar.

Lyfa gritted her teeth, and with a slight movement of her head, avoided the lance tip. She ignored the blazing heat where the lance grazed her cheek, and charged in, attacking the blood-red helmet with her sword.

"YAAAAAA!"

A straight thrust.

"Aaaaaah!!"

Taken by surprise, the enemy's eyes opened wide with dismay before disappearing behind a burst of yellow-green light created as a special effect. The ferocity of the attack caused the heavy armor of her opponent to shudder in response.

Unable to resist the blow, the enemy quickly plummeted toward the ground, and upon impact, received additional damage due to the weight of his armor, resulting in his HP decreasing by about 30%. Not a fatal blow, but due to the strong blow to the head, it's impossible for him to re-join the formation. Lyfa immediately switched targets, heart crying in hope.

—It's here!!

With the heavy assault tactics the enemy uses, their weakness is that when their formation is broken it takes time to get reorganized. While the four remaining Salamanders were unsure about what to do, Lyfa stretched her wings as far as possible and forcibly moved left.

This made her body groan in pain because of the forced movement and excess friction. Lyfa endured the pain. In order to rotate as quickly as possible, she beat her right wing strongly while braking with her left wing. Using such an absurd action she quickly brought the next enemy into her sights.

The targeted Salamander, despite recognizing her intent, couldn't possibly hope to match that movement. Her turn completed, Lyfa's sword struck the Salamander.

The enemy on the left side took the blow perfectly, further disrupting their formation.

—If this continues, we can do it!

Of the five enemies, only the leader, dispatched just a moment ago, was capable of "Voluntary Flight;" the rest can only use the secondary flight controllers. Since Lyfa is using "Voluntary Flight", her agility greatly exceeds the Salamanders during melee combat.

At this point she was searching for Recon, who was fighting the Salamander on the right. Despite an unreliable appearance, he is also a veteran player. In close combat, his ability with his daggers is something to be reckoned with.

Lyfa, with longsword in hand, brought her attention back to the enemy she was targeting, and continued to deal precision damage. This might just work, she thought. The only element that made her uneasy was the previous magical attack. That fire magic meant that among the five, at least one of the Salamanders was a Mage. The possibility exists that among these metal armor-clad five all have some magic ability, that is to say, they might all be magic swordsmen. Even if the level of their magic was rather low, its power was still quite fierce. In accordance with the common sense of formations, the mage is probably arranged on either the right or left flank, Lyfa thought. In other words, the person she should now defeat is the seemingly frail opponent currently engaging Recon. At this distance, he shouldn't have sufficient time to cast any spells. So, if we can just take down those two, the survivors can be easily be dispatched in 5 minutes.

"Yaaaa!!"

Lyfa once more delivered a two-handed strike she could be proud of. Beautifully wounding her opponent's shoulder, his already red HP reduced even further.

"Damn!!"

Her enemy screamed curses even as his body was wrapped in crimson flame. Accompanied by the sound of burning, his body turned to ash before spreading to the four winds, leaving behind only a small red flame.

This flame is called «Remain Light», after it had disappeared, resurrection spells and items could be used. However, after one minute in this state, the player was automatically returned to the hometown of their race and brought back to life.

Lyfa shook off this thought and focused on the next enemy. The remaining three have slightly dull movements. They seem inexperienced in the use of a lance, and are very slow in close quarters combat. Watching them continue to execute extremely lame and slow surprise attacks, Lyfa, who can see through it all, feels their efforts were wasted. Attention drawn again to the other side, Recon was almost run through. His HP had been reduced somewhat, but not to the extent of needing recovery magic. At this rate, even with the overwhelming disadvantage of five vs. two, it is possible to win. With this in mind, Lyfa again lifted her sword.

However, in the next moment an eddy of flame engulfed Recon.

"Oaaaaaaaa!"

Recon screamed pitifully as he froze in mid-air.

"Stupid, don't stop, keep moving."

This sentence had not even reached Recon before he was pierced through by the nearly dead Salamander's lance.

"Sooooooooorry."

With the sound of this last apology, Recon's body was wrapped in a green whirlwind. This effect is called «End Frame», and only appears at death. Dissolving, Recon's body disappeared, and as with the Salamanders earlier, left only a Remain Light.

To Lyfa, it is unpleasant to see the Remain Light of a fallen companion, even if she knows it will disappear immediately as they revive. She bit her lip, knowing that such sentiments are a luxury she can't afford. In order to avoid the blasts of flame coming from below, she desperately rolled to the side.

...Damn, the mage turned out to be that guy at the beginning!

If I knew that earlier, I'd have chased him down and run him through. But it's too late for regrets. The situation is now absolutely disadvantageous.

However, she didn't give up. Until the end, even at an extreme disadvantage, she continued to look for a way to turn the situation around. These are the beliefs that she has cultivated over many years and which have become stronger since she took on the role as a swordswoman.

With the cover fire coming from the Salamander on the ground, the two in the air got in position and began high-speed thrusting attacks.

"Come!!" Lyfa shouted, raising her sword in challenge.

* * *

"Uaagh!!"

After a seemingly endless descent, accompanied only by my unseemly screams, I found myself in some nameless place. A surprised grunt escaped as I landed on my face rather than my feet. Remaining in that position for a few seconds, my face buried in the underbrush, I slowly righted myself.

The free-fall now ended, my heart relaxed, and I lay on the ground and glanced at my surroundings.

It was now night time. I found myself in a deep forest somewhere.

This forest was made up of giant trees that are probably hundreds of years old, all stretching up toward the sky for as far as I could see. However, the foliage was so dense I couldn't see very far. A full moon hung in the black starry sky, emitting a golden glow.

All around me, insects buzz and nocturnal birds sang. In the distance, I heard the roar of a wild beast. The fragrance of plants tickled my nose. The breeze gently brushed skin. Terror enveloped me as my senses took in the world around me. This world felt more real than reality— those were my feelings regarding this illusory world.

I had been a little skeptical when Agil said that «ALO» was the equal of SAO in the quality of its high-precision modeling and structure, but it seems that is indeed the case. Despite the fact that there was less than a year of additional development time, a far greater amount of information is running between my nervous system and the game than was the case with SAO.

"I...In the end, I still came back..."

I closed my eyes. In the two months since being liberated from that world, I had given up on ever coming back to a «VR WORLD», but here I was once more. Ah... I really never learn, do I? This thought flashed across my mind, and I could not help but laugh.

However, this world was a little different. Namely, even if my HP reached zero, I wouldn't die in the real world, and I was free to depart at any time and from any place. As I thought this, something else drew my attention.

What was with the abnormality in the imagery and that mysterious relocation...what on earth had just happened? Why had I been brought to this place? I should be at the starting town of the Spriggans, at least according to tutorial.

"Hey, no way...It can't be..."

My face began to spasm, I quickly lifted my shaking right hand, with the index and middle finger together. Nothing happened. I break into a cold sweat and quickly tried a few more times before remembering what the tutorial had just said, the menu and flight controller are both operated with the left hand.

I held out my left hand and repeated the action. This time, when I waved my fingers, sound effects and a burst of light occurred, then a translucent menu window opened. It had almost the same design as SAO. The menu has many buttons lined up side by side along the right edge.

"There, it's there."

At the bottom of the menu the «LOG OUT» button is flashing. I tried giving it a press. A warning message popped up to confirm the exit, along with «YES» and «NO» buttons.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Propping myself up on one arm, I sat up.

Looking around again, I seemed to be in the middle of a dense forest. Surrounding me was an expanse of trees that stretched endlessly in all directions, so far that not even the light of the stars above could be seen. I had no idea why I fell down here. Well, let's take a look at the map first, I thought. I looked back at the menu window. Pointing with my finger, what I saw displayed there made me freeze.

"Whaaaaa...!?"

I couldn't refrain from crying out.

At the top of the window, my nickname was displayed: Kirito, and my race: Spriggan. Below those were my Hit Points and Mana Points, which read 400 and 80, the beginning values. No problem so far.

What surprised me were the learned skills in the following column. I don't remember choosing any, so of course all I should have are empty columns. Instead, there are no less than eight listed skills. Perhaps these were the Spriggan starting skills, but it's still a bit much. Not quite believing my eyes, I touched the skill bar with my finger for more detail.

In the skills window, I saw several skills side by side. These skills included: «1-H Swords», «Unarmed skills», and «Parry», the Combat skills, as well as «Fishing», a support skill, but the proficiency values were abnormal. Most were at just about 900, and some had even reached 1,000 and had a tag denoting «MASTERY». Usually within MMORPGs, these skills require a very long time to complete, which meant that having skills maxed out from the first log-in is impossible.

No matter how I look at, this must be a BUG. That might also explain why I somehow flew to this place, maybe the system really is a bit unstable.

"Is this game ok? Is there GM support available?"

Looking down at the skills again, I'm hit with a slight feeling of déjà vu. Looking at the proficiency values again, it felt like I'd seen them before. 1-H Swords: 1000, Unarmed skills: 991, Fishing: 643.

It hit me like an electric shock; I finally made the connection. I started breathing hard.

I'd seen these before. These were the skills that I had spent two years developing in SAO. Unfortunately, «Dual Blades» is not there— probably because the «Dual Blades» skill doesn't exist in ALO. The skills of the «Black Swordsman Kirito» that caused the destruction of the floating city Aincrad had appeared before my eyes again.

I was truly confused, impossible things were happening; I couldn't even imagine what was going on. SAO and ALO are completely different games administered by completely different companies. If the saved data could've moved like that... Could it be that— here is...

"SAO?" I uttered, as I fell to my knees.

Shaking my head vigorously to clear such ridiculous thoughts, I turned back to the skills window.

I still wasn't sure what was going on, but hoping to gather more information, I navigated back to the main menu. This time I opened the items window.

"Whaaaa... what's this."

I can't understand anything. Displayed in front of me are dozens of lines consisting of numbers and characters. Enigmatic characters, numbers, letters, and pictures are all mixed together.

It appears these are really the items I possessed in Aincrad. Sure enough, for whatever reason, the save data for Kirito seems to have come to this world.

"So...wait a second."

I suddenly thought of a possibility.

If these are the items from Aincrad, —then «that» should be here too. I touch the item window, and scroll down the menu with my fingertip.

"Please, please, please be there."

I quickly scroll down the list, ignoring all of the gibberish. My heart started beating faster and a feeling like ringing bells resounds through my body.

"!"

My fingers unconsciously stopped. Below my finger was a line of letters like all of the others save it was emitting a warm green color. «MHCP001».

Almost forgetting to breathe, I touched the name with trembling fingers. After selecting the item, the color reversed. Moving my fingers I pressed the button labeled "Use Item."

A white glow appeared in the center of the window and spread toward the edges as it stretched out in my direction. As it emerged, it turned into a colorless, tear-shaped crystal.

Clutching the precious stone in my hands, I raised it, feeling its warmth. Realizing all this, I felt a little feverish.

God, please, I beg you... I prayed from the depths of my heart, gently tapping the crystal twice with my finger. Pure white light exploded forth from the crystal in my hands.

"Ah!?"

My astonished voice unconsciously leaked from my mouth as I crouched down and placed the crystal on the ground, retreating a few steps. The crystal floated off the ground a couple meters before stopping. The light coming from the crystal gradually grew until even the moon seemed pale in comparison and the surrounding trees were dyed in whitish-green.

I blinked, a spectator of the scene in front of me. From the center of the swirling light, a shadow appeared, taking on shape and a whitish hue. Wisps of long black hair drifted in all directions, along with a snow-white dress and long, slender limbs. Eyes closed, hands crossed on her chest, the figure of a beautiful young girl appeared. She, like the embodiment of light, slowly sank to the ground.

The bright light disappeared as quickly as it began. The girl, who was floating in the air, slowly opened her eyes with a fluttering of eyelashes. Her eyes, deep as the night sky, slowly fixed on me.

I couldn't move. Or speak. Or even blink.

The young girl looked at me, and her cherry-colored lips slowly opened. Words can't describe the beauty of that angelic smile. I gathered my courage and said to her, "It's me...Yui. Do you understand?"

Finishing, I glanced at myself. My attitude and appearance in this world are completely different from in that world.

However, such concerns were unnecessary. The girl's —Yui's— lips moved, and in a nostalgic voice so much like silver bells, said, "We meet again, Papa."

Tears in her eyes, Yui stretched out her arms and flew into my chest.

"Papa...Papa!" Yui called again and again, her thin arms tightly clasped around my neck, her face nestling mine. Hugging her little body tightly, I couldn't keep the sobbing sounds from escaping my throat.

Yui, Asuna and I had lived together in the world of SAO for three short days, before she disappeared. Although it was only for a short time, it was an irreplaceable memory so deeply engraved in my mind that it could

never be erased. During the long hard battle that was Aincrad, there was little happiness but for those few days, we were truly happy.

The feeling of sweet nostalgia wrapped around me as I stood there tightly holding Yui. Miracles were taking place in front of me. So, Asuna, we'll definitely meet again. We'll definitely return once more to those blissful days. This was the first time, since returning to the real world, that'd I'd felt such conviction.

I looked around the forest, found a convenient stump that had recently collapsed and sat down.

"So, just what on earth is going on?"

Resisting the urge to talk about Asuna, I asked of Yui, currently sitting on my lap.

With her face nestled against my chest, Yui looked up at me with an expression of supreme bliss.

"...?"

"What I mean is, this isn't the SAO world, is it?"

Yui quickly gave a description of what had happened since I last saw her. She was about to be deleted but instead was compressed and stored as part of the environmental data. After beating the game, the floating city Aincrad disappeared. Afterwards, I'd come to this new world of ALfheim, though I didn't know how my data had ended up here. However, the fact that Asuna still hadn't woken wasn't easy to put into words.

"Please, wait a moment."

Yui closed her eyes, as if straining to hear a far-away voice.

"This is—"

Yui's eyes snapped open, looking at me.

"It seems this world is based on a copy of the «Sword Art Online» server."

"Copy?"

"Yes. The framework and graphic format are produced by the same core program group. I was able to reproduce this form. That is enough to verify

this. However, the cardinal system is an older version and the game components are completely different.

"That's..."

I fell deep into thought.

ALfheim Online was released twelve months after the SAO incident. Argus had gone bankrupt, and in the aftermath, RECTO purchased Argus' technology assets and used them to develop a new VRMMO game. If you can take advantage of the game's main engine and feedback processes, development costs would be significantly reduced. In that case, the accuracy of this world wouldn't surprise me as much since the game is running on the same engine as SAO.

In other words, ALO is operating on a copy of the SAO system, which I can understand. But—

"But...why did my personal data appear here?"

"Papa, please let me look at your data."

Yui closed her eyes again.

"There is no doubt. This is the character data Papa used in SAO. The two games utilize an almost identical format not only for the save data, but also for common skill proficiency, so they can be inherited. But because the data denoting hit points and mana points is in a different format, HP and MP are not transfered. Then getting to the items, they are all corrupt. As long as you keep them, it is possible the system's error detection protocol will detect them. It would be better if you throw them away."

"Is that so...then ok."

I touched the item column and selected the garbled items en masse. There may have been items which contained memories, but this wasn't the time for sentiment. In any case, I couldn't even tell what they were, let alone use them.

So, with grim determination, I deleted all of the corrupted items. This left me with just the normal initial equipment.

"There shouldn't be any problems with my skill levels, right?"

"From the system's point of view, no. When compared to your playtime it's a little unnatural, but unless a GM directly checks, there shouldn't be any problem."

"Is that so? Heh. I've gone from Beater to Cheater."

Well, when it comes to character strength, the sky's the limit. I must reach the top of Yggdrasil and rescue Asuna. Besides, I didn't come to this game to enjoy myself, I'm not in the mood to play seriously.

Looking carefully at my status bar, I can tell this world doesn't equate numbers and strength. SAO's agility and strength parameters simply don't exist here, not to mention HP and MP increases are small. Also, as weapon skills increase, the only thing that changes is the number of weapons you can equip, there is no change in attack power. And, of course, SAO's signature Sword Skills, do not exist.

In other words, ALO focuses on the player's natural athletic ability and judgment. In SAO, attacks by lower-leveled opponents won't do too much to lower HP. But this doesn't seem to be the case here.

The only unknown is «magic», which did not exist within SAO. Now, only «Illusion Magic» is registered in the Magic field, so perhaps it is the initial skill of the Spriggan race. I have never used magic nor have I ever been hit by it, so I don't really understand it.

I closed the window, facing Yui who was still clinging to my chest with her eyes narrowed like a cat, and asked, "Now that you mention it, what is Yui supposed to be in this world?"

Despite the fact that I can touch her, Yui is not human. Abnormalities in the SAO maintenance procedures resulted in her birth. She is an artificial intelligence, in other words, an «AI».

As of now, 2025, many research institutions have published papers including one entitled «Artificial Intelligence — Approaching Infinite Wisdom». This paper stated that as long as «rational behavior» processes continue, eventually the boundary between simulation of wisdom and true wisdom will become blurred, resulting in the creation of advanced AI.

Yui may be such an existence, the first true AI. But that doesn't matter to me, I love Yui like a daughter and she thinks of me as her father. That's enough.

"Ah, there seems to be a pseudo-character program for user support in ALfheim Online. They are called «Navigation Pixies», I appear to be classified as such."

Saying that, she made a strange face for an instant. After that, her body suddenly lit up and then disappeared.

"YUI!?"

I cried out in panic. Going to stand up, I noticed something attached to my knee.

It was about ten centimeters in height, with slender arms and legs. Wearing a pale pink mini-dress that looks like it is made out of flower petals, with two translucent wings stretching out from its back. It is, to put it simply, a pixie. With that cute face and long hair, although she looks slightly different, she is, without a doubt, Yui.

"This is the appearance of a «Pixie»."

Yui stood on my knee, and with her hands on her hips, started to flap her wings.

"Oh..."

I exclaimed as I poke Yui's cheek with my finger.

"That tickles!"

Yui laughed, rising up into the air to escape my finger, accompanied by the sounds of flapping wings, before sitting on my shoulder.

"...Then, do you also have administrator privileges, like you did before?"

"I don't..." Yui said in a voice filled with frustration.

"At the moment, all I can do is access reference and wide area map data. I can also confirm the status of players I come in contact with, but I can't access the primary program database."

"Ah, is that so... Actually..."

My expression changed, and I changed the topic, finally getting to the main issue.

"Asuna...it seems your mother is here."

"Oh...Mama!?"

Yui jumped off of my shoulder, and hovered in front of my face.

"What do you mean?"

"....."

I was just about to explain about Sugou Nobuyuki, but I was still a bit hesitant. Yui had been driven to the brink of collapse by the negative emotions of humans in SAO. I did not want to let her be further contaminated by human malice.

"...After the closing of the SAO servers, Asuna did not return to the real world. I obtained information that in this world there was a person who looked like Asuna. It is possible that it might just be a coincidence, and some random character might have been created that looks like her. I might just be grasping at straws here."

"Ah...how've things come to this... I'm sorry Papa, normally I could just scan the player data, but without access to the system I can't do it."

"There's no need to blame yourself. Anyway, I have an idea where she might be. Yggdrasil...she seems to be there. That place, you know it?"

"Ah, this I know. Eh, eh, it's generally to the northeast, but quite a ways from here. If I were to convert it into real distance, it would be about fifty kilometers away."

"Wow, that really is a long distance. That's what, five times the diameter of Aincrad. Actually, why was I brought to this forest anyway?"

Yui lowered her head for a moment at my question.

"I think that your positional data was either damaged or confused with a nearby player, resulting in you ending up here. That's just a guess, though."

"If I'm going to fall anyway, couldn't I at least have fallen closer to Yggdrasil. Mm, at any rate, I've heard you can fly here?"

I stood up, and twisted my head to look over my shoulder.

"Oh, look, there really are wings."

From my back sprouted four long, greyish-blue, translucent wings. They are more like insect wings than anything else. But I don't even know how to make them move.

"How do I fly?"

"There seems to be a secondary controller for flight. Please hold up your left hand, as if to grip something."

I followed the directions of the small girl on my shoulder. Soon after, a joystick-like object appeared in my hand.

"Pull it toward you to rise, push it away from you to descend, left or right to turn, push the button to accelerate, and release the button to slow down."

"Nn."

I pulled the joystick toward myself. The wings on my back started to expand and before long began to glow. I pulled the joystick further toward myself.

"Oh."

Suddenly, my body started to float. I rose slowly until about one meter off the ground before I let my hand return to a natural position. Next, I pressed the accelerate button. My body started to move forward.

Then, I tried to drop and turn; I got the hang of it pretty quickly. This was considerably easier than the flight VR games I had played before and its operation was quite simple.

"I think I more or less get it. Now, there's something I'd like to know. What's the closest town to here?"

"To the west there is a town called «Sylvain». That's the closest. Ah."

Yui suddenly looked up.

"What's wrong?"

"Players are approaching. It seems like there is one person being chased by three others."

"Ooh, a battle. Let's go take a look."

"Papa is as care-free as ever."

As I talked to Yui, I opened the menu and equipped the sword that I received as my beginning weapon. Pulling it out, I swung it a few times.

"Wow, what a lousy sword. It's too light too; well, I guess I'll make do."

I re-sheathe my sword and summon the flight controller again.

"Yui, I'll leave the navigation to you."

"Got it!"

Answering in her bell-like voice, Yui took off from my shoulder. Following her, I too, took to the air.

* * *

Finally, the flame magic cast by the Salamander caught Lyfa and hit her in the back.

"Whaaaa!!!!!"

She could not feel pain or heat of course, but the attack had a large impact which made her lose balance. Fortunately, while running away she did not forget to set up a series of «Wind Attribute» defensive spells, so her HP bar was still good, but Sylphid territory still remained far away.

At that point, Lyfa became aware that her flight was becoming slower. Damn, I'm reaching the flight limit! My wings will lose all strength in just a few more seconds, and I won't be able to fly until they recharge.

"Ugh..."

Gritting her teeth, Lyfa performed a steep dive into the woods to escape. Since the enemy had a mage, even hiding with magic would be hard. But she had no interest in just giving up and getting killed.

Lyfa slipped into a gap in the canopy and passed through the tightly packed tree branches while nearing the surface. It was time. Flight speed slowed almost to a stop, soon she neared the ground. As she started to land, she turned her body to break, and after letting her feet touch the ground she jumped into a hole on the back of a gigantic tree. Then, holding her hands in the air, she prepared to launch a type of stealth magic.

Magic in ALO closely resembles a fantasy film, and can best be described as a «Spell» chant. In order for the system to identify the magic, the incantation needs to follow the correct rhythm and pronunciation. If the chant is interrupted part way through, it will fail to launch and the caster must start over.

Lyfa quickly finished incanting the spell. She had spent a lot of time to memorize and practice it, thereby reducing the time needed to recite it. As soon as she finished the spell, a light green atmosphere emerged from her

feet and slowly began to cover her entire hiding place until it completely enveloped her body. This was a defensive spell which prevented the enemy from seeing you. However, it could be penetrated by an enemy possessing a high-level «Scan» ability or a penetration spell. Lyfa held her breath and curled up to make herself as small as possible.

Before too long, Lyfa heard the sound that is unique to Salamanders in flight. Landing in the open space beyond the tree, the clanking of armor rang through the clearing followed by shouting.

"That Sylph should be around here, go search!!"

"No, Sylphs specialize in stealth. Let's use magic."

After saying that, he continued his spell incantation. Lyfa almost swore but instinctively kept her mouth shut. After a few seconds, something approached noisily from behind.

Several small red lizards with red eyes climbed over the roots of the gigantic trees. This was the «Fire Attribute» penetration magic: Dozens of the lizards emerge around the caster and search in an expanding circle and emit flames when they find something, immediately showing the location of other players or monsters.

Go away, you must not come over here!

Of course, the lizard has no set pattern, it moves randomly once summoned. Lyfa desperately prayed that the lizards go elsewhere, but it was in vain. One of the lizards touched the membrane surrounding Lyfa, it gave a high-pitched screech and flared into flames.

"We've got it, over here."

Hearing the sound of metal armor gradually approaching, Lyfa jumped from the shadows and flipped to land on her feet. She pulled out her sword and gracefully got in a ready stance, three Salamanders aimed their lances at her.

"Let's not be unreasonable now."

The man on the right pulled up the visor on his helmet. While his excitement was concealed by the helmet, he couldn't keep it out of his voice.

The man in the center, the leader, continued in a calm voice:

"I'm sorry, but this is our mission. If you hand over the money and items, then we'll let you go."

"Ah, why, kill her!! The enemy is a woman so I am very excited ah."

The speaker was the man on the left, who also lifted his visor as he said this. He looked like he was intoxicated by the violence, his gaze stuck on her.

Speaking from a year of gaming experience, this kind of «woman hunter player» is the worst kind of scum. Unfortunately, there are more than a few of them. Revulsion made goose bumps race up Lyfa's arms. If this type of player touches the body of another player except in battle, the system would instantly send a harassment report. This is acceptable because casualties are, in one way, one of the purposes of this game. If it is looked at another way, bloodshed is the freedom of players. Some players take to extremes and find it pleasurable to «hunt» the female players in a VRMMO.

In the normal operation of ALO such a thing can actually happen. Rumors come true, and it actually happens in-game, and with the thought of this, Lyfa shuddered.

Lyfa firmly set her feet, getting into her favorite two-handed sword stance. Putting power into her glance, she stared at the three Salamanders.

"I will definitely take at least one of you with me to the grave. If you are not afraid of the «Death Penalty», come at me."

Lyfa said in a low voice. The salamanders on both sides were enraged by her defiance, and raised their lances. The leader controlled them by raising both of his hands and said:

"Give it up, your wings have reached the limit. We're still flying."

Indeed, it was as he said. In ALO, if a player on the ground is attacked by an enemy in the air, they find themselves at a complete disadvantage. Moreover, this wasn't just one flying enemy, but three. But Lyfa would not give up. She would not hand over the money and beg for mercy.

"What a stubborn girl. Ah well, I guess it was inevitable."

Even the leader shrugged his shoulders, prepared his lance, and took to the air. The other two Salamanders took their controllers in their left hand and followed suit.

Even facing the three lances at the same time, Lyfa prepared to fully attack the closest enemy. She focused all of her strength on her blade. The three salamanders surrounded Lyfa and she was getting ready to charge the enemy, when something unexpected occurred.

Shrubs behind them suddenly began to shake, and a shadow jumped out and tore past the Salamanders' side, turned in the air, and after a few circuits around the clearing fell to the ground with a banging sound.

At this unexpected event, the three Salamanders and Lyfa froze for a moment then looked at the intruder.

"Arg, ouch. This is probably a crash landing."

This voice with no tension came from a lightly dark skinned male player while standing up. His black hair stood in natural spikes, and his large eyes gave an impression of mischief. Behind him stretched dark greyish-blue wings that marked him as a member of the Spriggan race.

What was a far eastern border territory Spriggan doing in this area? While thinking that, Lyfa started checking up his equipment. Plain black tunic and trousers which is not armor, and an inferior sword – no matter how I look at it, he's using the initial equipment. A beginner coming out to the depths of the neutral zone, what was he thinking?

No matter how you look, he was a novice. Lyfa did not want him to see this cruel hunting scene, without thinking she called out.

"What are you doing? Quickly, run away!!"

But the black boy did not move. Did he not know that players of different races are allowed, and by the rules even encouraged, to kill him? After putting something in his breast pocket with his right hand, he looked at Lyfa and then at the hovering Salamanders and said:

"Three soldiers attacking one girl, that's a bit much isn't it?"

"What did you say?"

This speech enraged the two Salamanders at the back. They moved to sandwich the boy from the front and rear, surrounding him while still in the air. They lowered their lances and prepared to charge.

"Damn!"

Lyfa wanted to go and help, but couldn't move carelessly because the leader was still in the sky in front of her.

"Idiot, how dare you come out here so nonchalantly? Well, just as you want, we'll have some fun hunting you, too!"

The boy was standing in front of the Salamanders whose armor clattered as they lowered their visors. As the two Salamanders lowered their lances to charge, their wings produced a brilliant ruby light. The Salamander in front started his attack while the one behind waited for a few seconds longer, planning to take advantage of the difference in timing to kill the boy when he dodged the first attack.

It wasn't something a newbie could cope with. I don't want to see the moment the lances pierce through his body, Lyfa thought. She bit her lips and was about to look away, but before that.

She still couldn't believe what happened.

With his right hand still covering the pocket, he casually stuck out his left hand and caught the tip of the lance that was aiming at his life. Light and sound rippled through the air signaling the activation of the skill: «Guard». Lyfa could not believe what she saw, surprise forcing her eyes to go wide and her jaw to drop. The boy used the Salamander's momentum to throw him into his companion approaching from behind.

"Woo ah ah ah ah ah!"

Screams were ripped from the two Salamanders as they collided and sank to the ground in a clatter of metal.

The boy wheeled around, and while grabbing the hilt of his sword shot a puzzled look at Lyfa.

"These people, does it matter if I cut them?"

"Of course not, that was what they were planning to do to you just a moment ago."

Lyfa answered in utter amazement.

"I see that, well, excuse me for a moment."

The boy drew his shabby sword with his right hand, and let it hang loosely toward the ground. After saying something fairly daring, Lyfa expected him

to immediately start attacking, but he didn't move. Then, he put his left foot forward, adjusted his center of gravity and suddenly...

Boom!! The boy disappeared at the same time as some sort of sound impacted her. A sonic boom!?! Lyfa had fought against many enemies, but had never seen such an attack, her eyes couldn't even follow the boy's movement. As she hurriedly turned her head to the right, the boy stopped moving with his body low to the ground far away from where he had started. He completed his technique by swinging his sword toward his sheathe.

Among the two Salamanders, one of them became wrapped in the red of End Frame as he tried to stand up. His body quickly turned to ashes and dispersed to the four winds, leaving only a Remain Light.

Way too Fast!!

Lyfa shuddered. This action and the attack were beyond anything she had ever seen, in a whole different dimension. Her body trembled with elation at what just happened.

In this world, only one thing controls how fast you can move: the speed at which your brain receives signals from the «Full Dive» system and reacts to them. Amusphere sends signals to the brain's cognitive faculties, then the brain processes these signals and produces signals which control the motor functions of the body. These signals are then intercepted by the Amusphere system. The faster a player's brain is able to do this, the faster the player can move in the game. Innate reflexes are one of the things that determine how fast this happens but the speed is also improved with experience, so the longer one plays the faster they can move.

This is not to boast, but Lyfa's speed is within the top 5 of all Sylphs. Her speed has been forged by training her reflexes for many years and honed by a year of playing ALO. She had been confident that no matter who she encountered, one-on-one her speed would not lose out to anyone.

Lyfa and the Salamander leader were still dumbfounded as the boy stood up and turned toward them, once again gracefully bringing his sword into position.

The other Salamander, whose charge was dodged, still didn't seem to know what happened. He was still moving in the opposite direction while trying to find the boy who had disappeared from in front of him.

The boy once again attacked without mercy, rushing towards the confused Salamander. I definitely won't miss it this time Lyfa thought as she concentrated on the boy's movement with her eyes wide open.

The initial motion was not all that fast, but it seemed to sway. However, that was only until he took the first real step of his attack and...

The atmosphere was hazy and seemed to shake with the noise. I somehow saw it this time. Like watching a movie on fast-forward, Lyfa's eyes were able to catch most but not all of the frames. The sword of the boy jumped from its lowered position and cuts the Salamander in two. Even the effect flash couldn't quite keep up with him. The boy moved several meters forward, stopping with the sword held high. Once again a spray of fire erupted, announcing the second Salamander's death.

Lyfa was so entranced by the speed that she only now noticed how much damage the boy's attacks were doing. The two Salamander's HP bars, which had been almost half full, quickly disappeared. In short, the boy's attacks were as astounding as his speed.

ALO's attack formula is not complicated. It depends on four things: Power of the weapon itself, where on the opponent's body the attack hits, attack speed, and the armor worn by the opponent. On this occasion, the attack power of his weapon was almost the lowest, while the Salamander's armor was really quite high level. The strength of his attacks came from the boy's accuracy and overwhelming speed.

The boy settled into a relaxed posture and looked up at the leader of the Salamanders who was still hovering in the air. With his sword leaning against his shoulder, the boy opened his mouth and said:

"So, are you going to fight?"

The boy's words were completely untouched by tension. Even the Salamander had to smile.

"No, I do not have a chance of winning, forget it. I will give you my items if you ask for them. My Magic skill is close to 900, and the «Death Penalty» will make all my work a waste."

"You are an honest man."

The boy laughed briefly, and turned his gaze to Lyfa.

"You there, young lady, what do you want? If you want to fight him, I will not disturb you."

Throwing everything into chaos and causing so much commotion, then actually saying such a thing, Lyfa had to laugh. He's the type that can come into a battlefield and deflate everyone's fighting spirit.

"I'm good too. Next time I will win, Mr. Salamander."

"To be honest, fighting you one-on-one, I do not think I could win."

Finished, the Salamander spread his wings and flew away, leaving a trail of red light. Then, leaving the trees shaking with his passage, he disappeared into the distance in the dark sky. That left only Lyfa and the black clad boy in the clearing with the two Remain Light. A minute later, they too disappeared.

As she looked at the boy, Lyfa tensed up again.

"So, what should I do? Should I thank you? Should I run away? Or should we fight?"

He swung his blade once from right to left and put it away with the sound of a blade being sheathed.

"Ah, for me it's the knight of justice saving the princess from the villains, like that."

He laughed with a grin.

"Moved by gratitude, the crying princess will come for a hug."

"Are you an idiot?"

Lyfa cried out unintentionally, her face blushing.

"I would rather fight you!"

"Ha ha, kidding kidding."

While looking at the boy laughing happily, Lyfa ground her teeth in anger. She was considering how to get back at him when, suddenly a voice came from nowhere.

"That's right, I can't allow that."

It was a young girl's voice. Looking around restlessly, Lyfa did not see anything moving in the shadows. At this point, the boy looked a bit flustered and said:

"Ah, hey, I told you not to come out!"

Lyfa turned to look at the boy's breast pocket as something glittering jumped out. It was a small being, who then hovered near his face making a slight buzzing sound.

"Only mama and me can stick to papa!"

"Pa, Papa!?"

Lyfa moved a few steps closer, only to find a palm-sized fairy creature. It was a navigation pixie that could be summoned from the help window. But, if that was the case, it should only be able to answer basic questions related to the game.

Lyfa forgot to be wary of the boy, her gaze fixed intently on the flying pixie.

"Oh, no, this is..."

The boy hurriedly wrapped both hands around the pixie and brought it close to him, a slightly forced smile plastered to his face. Lyfa looked at the pixie in the boy's hands and asked:

"Hey, is that a «Private Pixie»?"

"Huh?"

"It was a special promotion when the game first came out, there was a lottery of sorts and the winners received a Private Pixie. This is the first time I've ever seen one."

"Ah, I woo goo!"

The Pixie started to say something, but was interrupted when the boy placed a finger over her mouth.

"Yes, yes, that must be it. I have good luck with lotteries."

"Well, fuu..."

Lyfa looked at the Spriggan boy over again, studying him from top to bottom.

"Wh...What is it?"

"You're a weirdo. You obviously started the game when it first came out, but you are still using the initial equipment. Or so that's what I think since you are strong."

"Ah this.. Actually, this account was created in the old days, but I only started recently. I was playing another VRMMO for a long time."

"Really?"

Lyfa thought that might just make sense. If he was familiar with the Amusphere because he had been playing other games, then it might just be possible to achieve that insane speed of his.

"Having said that, you are obviously part of the Spriggan race, but why are you here? Your race's territory is to the far east isn't it?"

"I... I got lost."

"Lost??"

At his helpless answer, Lyfa shouted in spite of herself.

"Even a person who has no sense of direction has limits... You are too strange."

Laughter bubbled up from the bottom of her chest when she saw the boy's strained expression. After a while, Lyfa put the sword that was still in her hand back into its sheath and said:

"Well, anyway, I guess I have to thank you. Thank you for helping me, I am Lyfa."

"I am Kirito, and this child is Yui."

When the boy opened his hands, the pixie flew out with her cheeks puffed out in a sulking expression. She bowed to Lyfa then flew to Kirito's shoulder and sat down.

Lyfa was a little surprised to realize she wanted to talk to this boy named Kirito. It wasn't too unusual for her to make friends in this world, as she didn't go out of her way to avoid other players. He doesn't look like a bad person, Lyfa thought to herself, and said:

"So, what do you plan on doing now?"

"Well, I don't really have any plans."

"This...ah. Well then, let me treat you to a drink to thank you, alright?"

After hearing this, the young man named Kirito laughed with a smile on his face. Lyfa looked at his smile and thought it was a smile from the heart. People who are able to laugh so openly and show such emotion in the VR world are rare.

"That makes me happy. I was actually looking for someone who could tell me a lot of things."

"A lot of things?"

"Things about this world... especially..."

He stopped his smile as his eyes shift to the northeast.

"That tree thing."

"The World Tree? Sure. Even if I look like this, I'm actually a veteran player. Let's see, even though a bit far, there's a neutral village to the north, let's fly there."

"Isn't the town of Sylvain closer?"

Lyfa was a little shocked and looked at Kirito's face before answering...

"Though that is true... Do you really know nothing? That is Sylph territory."

"Is there a problem?"

Hearing Kirito say this, Lyfa was at a loss of words.

"...The problem...I guess you could call it that. Anyway since it is Sylph territory, you won't be able to attack within the town, but any Sylph will be able to attack you."

"Ah, I see. But the people won't attack me if I'm with Lyfa-san, will they? I really wanted to see the country of the Sylphs, I've heard it's beautiful."

"Just call me Lyfa. You really are a strange person. Well...I don't mind trying, but I can't guarantee your safety."

Lyfa shook her shoulders and replied. Well, wanting to visit her beloved Sylph capital wasn't a bad thing. Since Spriggans are rarely seen around here, bringing him with me will probably cause quite a stir, Lyfa thought with a mind full of mischief.

"Well then, we'll fly to Sylvain. It will be getting busy soon."

Lyfa said as she checked a window to see the time in the real world. It was now four o'clock in the afternoon. She couldn't stay in this "dive" much longer.

Lyfa, whose flight ability had almost finished recharging, spread her wings which started to gently glow and vibrate. Kirito tilted his head to the side, looking puzzled, and asked:

"Lyfa, is it possible for you to fly without the secondary controller?

"Ah, yes. You?"

"I just learned how to use it recently."

Kirito, moved his left hand to make the gesture of grabbing something.

"I see, there's a trick for voluntary flight. People who can do it will soon be able to, let's try it. Don't bring out the controller then turn away, so your back is to me."

"Like so?"

Kirito turned his body in a half circle, his back wasn't that wide, Lyfa extended her index fingers to touch a bit above his shoulder blades. The pixie on his shoulder watched in fascination.

"The place I touch, remember it."

"OK."

"It might be called voluntary flight, but that isn't just flying by imagination. What you have to do is learn to grow the virtual bone and muscle that become your wings, then learn how to move them."

"Virtual bone...and muscle..."

Kirito repeated in an ambiguous voice. As he said that, his shoulder blades started twitching. From the place Lyfa had touched, grey wings pushed through his clothes. At first they moved awkwardly, but as they became synchronized his wings started moving as one.

"Oh, yeah, just like that. First move your shoulders and muscles to grasp the feeling of wing movement."

Once she said that, the muscles in his back started to quickly contract. With that, his wings began to vibrate and Lyfa could hear a humming noise.

"That's it! Now, more strongly!"

"Um um um"

Lyfa, stretched her arms as far as they would go and left her hands on Kirito's back until his wings were producing sufficient thrust. At that moment, Lyfa suddenly pushed up on his back with all her might.

"Whoa!?"

Once airborne, the Spriggan shot up like a rocket.

"Oh...Oh...Oh...Wow!"

Kirito's body immediately became smaller and smaller, his screams quickly becoming too distant to hear. With the rustling of leaves, he quickly disappeared beyond the distant treetops.

"....."

Lyfa exchanged looks with the pixie who had fallen off of Kirito's shoulder.

"Oh no."

"Papa...!!"

They took off at the same time, hurrying to chase after Kirito. After they left the sea of trees, they carefully searched for him in the night sky, and finally found him unsteadily moving off to the right while casting a shadow in the golden moon.

"Ohohohoh waawaawaa..... Please stop meeee!"

A miserable scream broke the silence of the night and echoed through the endless sky.

"...Puu"

Lyfa and Yui looked at each other, and they could not help laughing.

"Pfft...Huh...Hahahah...!"

"I'm sorry papa, so funny ~~~"

As they hovered side by side in the air, they held their stomach laughing. When they were about to stop, they heard Kirito's screams, and broke into new gales of laughter.

Lyfa couldn't remember the last time she had laughed so hard. This must be the first time since she came to this world.

After laughing for long enough, Lyfa darted in and grabbed Kirito by the collar so that he stopped flying and finished teaching him the tricks to Voluntary Flight. For a beginner, Kirito was a quick learner. After 10 minutes or so of lecture, Kirito could fly freely.

"Oh ... this is ... amazing!"

Kirito shouted as he flew in circles and loops.

"Yes, that's right!"

Lyfa answered with a smile.

"How to say it, this is exciting! I want to fly forever..."

"That's right!"

Lyfa was also happy, she flew with wings vibrating in the same orbit as Kirito's, paralleling each other in flight.

"No fair... Me too!"

Yui caught up and took a position flying between the two.

"You should practice minimizing the movement of the lower back and scapula as much as possible. You won't be able to swing your sword well in aerial combat if you make too many unnecessary movements. Well then, let's fly to Sylvain like this. Come with me."

Lyfa did a tight turn to find their heading in the right direction, then started cruising over the forest. She began to worry she was going too fast for the new flyer Kirito, so she reduced her speed only to have Kirito start to pass her. She looked at Kirito and heard him say:

"We can go a bit faster if you want."

"Ho ho."

Lyfa's smile became predatory as she folded her wings at an acute angle and started speeding up. Kirito heard the sound being produced by her wings increase and accelerated to keep even with her. The pressure of the wind beating against her body increased, and the speed of the wind made hearing anything tricky.

Surprisingly, Lyfa soon reached 70% of her maximum speed and Kirito was still right by her side. Most people, when they begin to reach the top speed set by the system find their acceleration beginning to become dull, probably due to some kind of psychological pressure. For Kirito to be able to overcome this pressure on his first flight... he must have extraordinary mental strength.

Lyfa closed her mouth, and began to accelerate to maximum speed. She had never flown a formation at this speed before, mostly because none of her normal teammates were able to match her speed.

Right now the trees below her eyes looked like a swift current and quickly disappeared behind them. The vibration of her Sylphid wings, made a sound that resembled the high-pitched sound of a stringed instrument, mixed with Kirito's Spriggan wings, which sounded like a wind instrument, to form a beautiful duet.

"Ah... too...fast! It's no use!"

Yui cried, as she sprang into Kirito's breast pocket. Kirito and Lyfa looked at each other and laughed.

When she noticed, the forest was ending just ahead, and dots of light appeared. The brightest light came from the center tower. That is the symbol of Sylph's capital Sylvian, the "Tower of the Wind" . Soon the city came closer, and in the central street, there were a large number of players coming and going.

"Oh, I see it!"

Kirito said over the sound of the wind.

"We're landing at the base of the tower in the middle, oh!"

Lyfa suddenly realized something and the smile on her face became fixed.

"Kirito-kun, do you know how to land?"

"..."

Kirito said as his face stretched into a grimace.

"I don't have any idea!"

"Well...."

At this time, half of her field of vision was occupied by the huge tower.

"Sorry, it's too late, good luck."

With an apologetic smile, only she started the sudden deceleration needed for landing. Lyfa spread her wings for full breaking and put her feet in front of her and started the landing process.

"Such a foolish....."

The Spriggan screamed, Lyfa watched as he barreled toward the outer wall of tower, she sincerely hoped that he would survive his landing.

After a few seconds, BANG!! As a terrible sound shook the air.

"Hum, Lyfa is so mean, I think I have now developed a fear of flying."

At the bottom of the tower, Kirito was sitting up in the middle of the flower bed where he had crashed.

"My eyes are spinning..."

The pixie sitting on his shoulder was reeling with dizziness. Lyfa put her hands on her hips, suppressing laughter and replied:

"You are too full of enthusiasm. I am surprised you are still alive, I thought you would be dead for sure."

"Ah, that's too much!"

Kirito hit the tower wall while flying as fast as the game allows, but he still had almost half of his HP left. Not knowing whether he had a naturally strong body or was just lucky, but he was the embodiment of a lot of mysteries for a beginner.

"Ok ok, I will heal you."

Lyfa cast a healing spell as she held out her right hand. Navy blue light spread from the palm of her hand and slowly fell on Kirito's body.

"Oh, great. So this is magic."

Kirito curiously looked around his body as the bluish light fell like snow.

"Only Undines can easily use high-ranking recovery magic. But it is an indispensable spell so you should learn it."

"So each race has strengths and weaknesses when it comes to magic? What is the specialty of the Spriggan race?"

"There are two: magic that assists in finding treasure and Illusion magic. As neither of them is usable in battle, it is the most unpopular race."

"Ahhh... I really should have done my homework."

Kirito shrugged his shoulders, stood up, and turned to look at the city.

"Oh, this is Sylph city. What a beautiful place."

"Right?"

Lyfa once again looked around the hometown she had lived in for so long.

«Sylvain», also known as the «Emerald capital», is a city that lives up to its name. Spires of varying green shades rise along a complex airy corridors which connect the streets. Bursting out of each tower is a brilliant dark green light that gives the city an impression of a fantasy kingdom. Behind the «Tower of Wind» is the «Lord's Mansion», a magnificent building, which Lyfa is confident that it's superior to most of the buildings in ALfheim.

They silently looked at the city of light, watching the flow of people coming and going, and suddenly the sound of a greeting came from the right.

"Lyfa-chan, you are safe!"

Turning around, I saw a yellow-haired Sylph boy waving like crazy and running toward us.

"Ah, Recon. Yes, somehow I survived."

Recon looked at Lyfa with eyes that sparkled.

"Indeed, you really are amazing, to be surrounded by so many enemies but still come out of it in one piece...oh....."

Recon finally noticed the figure in black standing next to Lyfa, and froze with his mouth hanging open for a few seconds.

"Isn't that a Spriggan? Why is he here!?"

Recon said as he jumped back in a panic, his hand going to the hilt of the dagger hanging at his waist only to be stopped by Lyfa.

"Calm down Recon. He is the reason I survived."

"Huh?"

Lyfa pointed at Recon and said to Kirito:

"This is Recon. He is my companion, but was killed by the Salamanders just before I met you."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Nice to meet you, I am Kirito."

"Oh...ah, nice to meet you."

Recon grasped Kirito's right hand and bowed.

"Now is not the time for this!"

Recon jumped back.

"Is he ok Lyfa-chan? Maybe he is a spy!?"

"I thought so at first too, but he is too much of a natural airhead to be a spy."

"Ah, that's mean!"

Lyfa and Kirito laughed, Recon looked on with suspicion, and eventually, cleared his throat before saying:

"Lyfa-chan, Sigurd and the others are waiting in the «Narcissus Hall», they are ready to distribute the spoils from our hunting trip."

"Oh...I see...well..."

When you are killed by an enemy, 30% of the non-equipment items in your possession are "stolen" by the enemy player. What items are taken is decided at random. However, when in a party there is something called Insurance Frame which will automatically transfer the items of a killed player to their party members.

Today, since Lyfa was the last member of their party alive, the Insurance Frame transferred all of the items they had acquired into her possession. That is why the Salamanders had pursued her so persistently. So, it was only thanks to Kirito that all of their hard work had arrived at Sylvain.

It had become a custom among Lyfa and her companions to meet at a familiar store, Narcissus Hall, to re-distribute any items that had been acquired during a hunting trip. However, Lyfa was a bit troubled and said to Recon:

"I'm not participating today. There isn't any item that matches my skills anyway. I will give it to you to divide among the four other party members."

"Eh? Lyfa-chan isn't coming?"

"Ah, I promised Kirito I would treat him to something to drink in return for saving me."

"..."

As Recon turned to look at Kirito, some of the suspicion from earlier returned – in a slightly different form.

"Hey, don't think about something strange."

Lyfa kicked Recon after saying that. She opened her item trade window and transferred all of the day's loot to him.

"E-mail me when you are ready for the next hunt. If I can I will go. Anyway, good job."

"Ah, Lyfa-chan..."

Somehow embarrassed, Lyfa forcibly broke off the conversation, grabbed Kirito's sleeve, and walked away.

"That boy just now, is that Lyfa's boyfriend?"

"Or is he your lover?"

"Phttt!?"

Yui who stuck her head out of Kirito's pocket, was the one who had raised her voice and asked this right after him. Lyfa immediately tangled her feet, her wings hurriedly spread to compensate for her loss of balance.

"No... that's not right, we are only party members."

"But your relationship seems very good!?"

"I know him in the real world, he is my classmate at school, nothing more than that."

"Eh, that must be nice...playing VRMMO with classmates."

Hearing Kirito say that in an envious tone, she looked at him with slight frown.

"Well, there are various evils too... it makes you remember that thing known as homework."

"Ha ha ha, I see."

They walked down the street while having this conversation. From time to time they'd encounter other Sylph players, and upon seeing Kirito's black hair they expressed surprised looks, but in seeing Lyfa next to him they

kept to themselves and walked past. Lyfa wasn't very active, but she had won the Sylvain fighting tournament several times, so she was well-known and popular.

Finally, they came to a small and cozy inn and pub called «Lily of the Valley Pavillion». This was one of Lyfa's favorite places to eat because they had very good desserts.

When Lyfa opened the door and looked inside, she discovered the shop was empty save for a pair of players. Since it was just becoming evening in the real world, the restaurant would soon get busy as players would want a couple drinks after they returned from adventuring.

They sat face to face at a secluded window table.

"Since I invited you, pick anything you would like."

"If you're sure it's alright."

"Don't eat too much now or you'll regret it when it's time to log out and have dinner."

Lyfa said while looking at the delicious desserts listed on the menu.

This phenomenon is very strange. For some reason when you eat in ALO it produces a false impression of being full, and this feeling doesn't immediately disappear when you return to the real world. To Lyfa, one of the greatest charms of a VRMMO is that she could indulge her sweet-tooth without having to worry about calories. She had to be careful not to eat too much though because her mother would probably be angry if she didn't eat anything.

Suffering from malnutrition or using this effect to diet is not unheard of. Even now once in a while on the news, there are players who are so dedicated to the game that they forget to eat and are weakened to death.

Finally, Lyfa pointed at the menu and ordered a Bavarian fruit tart. Kirito ordered a piece of fruit pie and a bottle of spiced wine, and to her surprise Yui ordered a cheese biscuit. The NPC waitress immediately brought our order to the table and arranged it in front of us.

"Well then, once again, thank you for helping me."

Clinking a glass of the mysterious green wine with Kirito, Lyfa drank the full glass of the cool liquid and felt it move down her parched throat. Kirito also drank his glass in one gulp, laughed shyly and said:

"Oh no, it was a matter of course...even so, they were very belligerent weren't they? Is that kind of PK group common?"

"Ah, originally the relationship between the Salamanders and the Sylphs was bad. Our territories are adjacent so we are usually competing for the resources in the same piece of neutral ground. Unsurprisingly, this antagonism eventually soured and the two races are now practically at war. However, that kind of organized PKing only started recently. I am certain that they are planning to attack the World Tree soon."

"That, I want you to tell me about the world tree."

"Ah yes, you said something about that before. But why do you want to know?"

"I want to go to the top of the World Tree."

Surprised, Lyfa looked at Kirito and peered at his face. The serious look in his eyes told her that he wasn't joking.

"It certainly is something all players want, at least I think so. It is the main quest of ALO game."

"How so?"

"You know there is a limit on the amount of time you can fly, right? No matter which race, the max flight time is about 10 minutes. However, the race that reaches the «City in the Air» at the top of the world tree first gets to meet the Fairy King «Oberon» and can be reborn as the higher species «ALF». This race of fairies has no time limit on flying, and will be free to fly freely through the sky, forever if they want."

"...I see..."

Kirito took a bite of fruit pie and nodded.

"It is indeed a fascinating story. Do you know a method of getting to the top of the world tree?"

"Inside the world tree, the roots form a huge dome. There is an entrance to the City in the Air at the top, but to reach that entrance you have to get

past an army of NPC guardians. Up to now, many racial groups have attempted to pass through this dome, but these parties were quickly wiped out. The Salamanders are currently the most powerful race, they have been saving a lot of money, and they've been purchasing a lot of equipment and items. I think they will be the next to dare the world tree."

"Are the guardians really that strong?"

"Unbelievably hard. Think about it, ALO came online over a year ago. What kind of quest is it that you can't clear in a year?"

"That's definitely..."

"In fact, just last fall, a well-known ALO information in a web site launched a petition, aimed at making Recto Progress adjust the balance of the game."

"Wow, and then?"

"Of course, it was the usual answer. 'This game has been operated with an appropriate balance' bla bla bla. Lately, there are opinions that the world tree can't be conquered using current methods."

"Perhaps you have overlooked a key point of this quest, or it is not possible to capture the world tree with just a single species?"

Lyfa's hand, which was bringing her tart to her mouth, suddenly stopped, as she shot another piercing glance at Kirito.

"Oh, you have a good idea. If we are missing a quest, we can find out. But the second part is impossible."

"Impossible?"

"Because that's contradicting. 'Only the first race to reach it can clear it'. Do you think the races would work together to capture the world tree if this is the case?"

"Then what you mean is... it is virtually impossible to climb the world tree?"

"I think so. Moreover, there are many other quests, like mastering skills to improve item production, among many others. But, I won't give up, or we will never know the joys of true flight. So, even if it takes many years, surely..... "

"Well, that will be too late!"

Kirito cried out in a hushed tone. Lyfa was surprised at the despair in that voice and looked at Kirito. She found his eyebrows furrowed and his teeth clenched so hard that he was actually shaking.

"Papa..."

Holding the cheese biscuit in both hands and chewing small bites, the pixie stopped eating and put the food down. Then she flew up to sit on Kirito's shoulder, holding his cheek to comfort him. Finally, the tension ebbed from Kirito's body.

"...I'm sorry I surprised you."

Kirito said in a low voice.

"But I...I really have to get to the top of the world tree."

Dark eyes that were glinting as brilliantly as a polished sword as they stared at her, Lyfa's heart began to resound in her chest. Lyfa took a sip of wine in an attempt to calm down and said:

"Why must you go so far?"

"I'm looking for someone."

"What do you mean?"

"It's something which cannot be explained simply."

Kirito smiled at Lyfa, but his eyes revealed the depth of his despair. Where have I seen eyes that look like that?

"Lyfa...thanks, your teaching helped me a lot. Thank you for the delicious meal. I'm glad you were the first person I met here."

Lyfa unconsciously grasped Kirito's wrist as he stood up.

"Hey, wait a minute...do you really plan on going to the world tree?"

"Yeah, this is something I have to see with my own eyes."

"That's crazy, doing that. It's very far away. There are many powerful monsters between here and the world tree. I know you are strong, but..."

Oh, she thought and it was already coming out of her mouth:

"Then, I'll take you there."

"Oh?"

Kirito's eyes opened wide.

"No, but, I shouldn't impose on someone I've just met..."

"Yes, I've already passed through the gate of decision!!"

Lyfa turned away to hide the cheeks that had become hot. In ALO, because there are wings to fly, other means of instantaneous movement do not exist. Therefore, journeying to the center of the world, the world tree, and the capital of ALfheim, «Aarun» is just like a journey in the real world. Moreover, to offer to make this journey with a young man she had just met a few hours ago, this was behavior that even Lyfa thought was incredible.

But – why... I can't just leave him alone.

"Will you be here tomorrow?"

"Oh...Yeah."

"Then three o'clock in the afternoon. I have to go now. If you want to log out, then use a room in «Lily of the Valley Pavillion». So, see you tomorrow."

Finished, Lyfa opened the menu by waving her right hand. As a Sylph, she can immediately log out from anywhere in this territory, so she pressed the logout button.

"Ah, wait!"

Kirito raised his head to face Lyfa and said with a smile:

"Thank you."

Lyfa finally smiled and she nodded once, then she pressed the OK button. The world was wrapped in rainbow-colored light, then became dark. Lyfa's body gradually faded, only the heat of her face and beat of her heart making it to the real world.

She slowly opened her eyes.

The familiar poster attached to her ceiling entered her vision. This was an enlarged screenshot that she printed out. The poster featured an infinite

sky, free-flying birds, and the central picture of a flying fairy girl with long hair in a ponytail.

Kirigaya Suguha raised her hands to her head and took off the Amusphere helmet. With only two security rings side by side, it is a delicate looking machine that in comparison to the first generation, Nerve Gear, seems luxurious to many but also gives less of an impression of being binding equipment.

Even though she had returned to the real world from the false one, her cheeks showed no sign of cooling. Suguha sat up straight in bed, her hands pinching her face, a shout echoing in the depths of her heart.

...Wuwa!

Too late now, she felt a tremendous surge of embarrassment at her actions, only more and more aware of just how bold she had been. Before she started playing, her classmate, Nagata Shinichi, aka Recon, had told her that as long as she transformed into Lyfa, her boldness would increase by fifty percent. She never thought it would lead to the kind of extreme behavior she displayed today. Suguha was in agony for a while, thrashing both legs.

He was a mysterious young man. No, as a player there was no way to know his age, but Suguha's intuition told her that their age was only a little different. But he had a surprisingly calm demeanor, and no mischievous behavior or naughty words, so she couldn't be sure.

Not only was his character enigmatic, but he was fearfully strong. So much that if they were to cross blades, she was sure she would lose. In her one year of play, he was the first person she met that was like that. Suguha blurted out his name:

"Kirito-kun, hmmm"

I want to see it for myself, that illusionary world, Suguha had thought for the first time a year after the SAO incident.

Before that, to Suguha, VRMMO games where almost an anathema, for taking away her brother, she had no words capable of describing her sense of revulsion. But in holding his hand in the ward and trying to hold onto his speech and her memories of who he was, curiosity sprouted about what kind of thing could draw him strongly enough that he could end up

like this. She wanted to know more about him— because of that thought she decided to see for herself, as she thought it was the only way to narrow the distance between her and her brother.

'I want an Amusphere.' Suguha asked her mother. Midori looked at Suguha and nodded slowly. 'Just take care not to use it too much and pay attention to your physical health.' Her mother said, laughing.

The next day, during lunch break, she found herself standing in front of Nagata Shinichi. He was someone known as a maniac and was the best gamer in her class. She had gone to his desk and said she would wait for him on the roof. At that time the class was shrouded in silence, only to break out in shocked speech.

On the roof, Suguha looked at Nagata Shinichi whose eyes shone in expectation while frozen said. 'I want you to teach me how to play VRMMO.' Nagata heard this and made all kinds of comical faces for several seconds, then asked what she wants to know.

Suguha could not afford to spend less time on studies or kendo practice. Upon hearing this, Nagata said 'So, something that's not too time intensive and based on player skills right?' and other questions. What he recommended was ALfheim Online.

She didn't know Nagata would start playing ALO with her. However, due to his exhaustive and exhausting lecture, Suguha had adapted to the game with amazing speed, and she found she was very good at the game. There were two reasons for this:

The first reason is that Suguha had been doing Kendo for many years and the skills learned there were very effective for fights in ALO.

In general, the fighting between players did not take evasion into account. Mainly, players just attacked the enemy and then took his attack in return, this would continue until one of the players could no longer fight or died. But Suguha, because of her long practice, was easily able to avoid or deflect the attacks aimed at her. Of course, her strong attacks count too.

In addition, ALO is not a level-based game. So despite logging far less time than the most experienced players, she was able to match up with some of the best fighters in ALO. In fact, Lyfa's numerical parameters were average and lower than most old players but because it ran off a purely skill-based system, she was considered one of the top Sylph players.

The second reason why Suguha played ALO is because of the ability to be able to fly which is unique to this game.

Suguha can still remember when she first mastered Voluntary Flight, the sensation was unforgettable.

Suguha was often plagued with the physical limitations in kendo matches, wanting to move faster, strike harder, and go further. That's why when she finally mastered voluntary flight, and was able to fly and use both hands to hold her sword, when she became able to perform the ultra-long distance thrusts, she felt a pleasure beyond description. Aside from this, doing steep dives or flying with a flock of birds was also very attractive to her.

For Recon with his flight problems, he calls her "Speed Holic" and other things. It probably meant her joy at flying in ALO.

After a year, Suguha is already considered a full-fledged VRMMO player. Even though Suguha had originally started playing ALO to get closer to her brother, she had fallen in love with the virtual world.

And when Kazuto came back, Suguha wanted to talk to him about ALO and similar interests, but when she saw the shadows cross his eyes, she couldn't bring herself to do so.

The SAO incident, Suguha thought this tragic experience affected Kazuto's love of the virtual world. He recovered his Nerve Gear, but it just sat in his room with the SAO rom like an ornament.

For Kazuto, the SAO incident probably hasn't yet ended. «That person» has not woken up, she continues to sleep.

Thoughts of that sent Suguha's heart into turmoil. Like yesterday, she did not want to see Kazuto in such an endless despair, he had even cried. Suguha wanted to see him laugh again, for that reason, she wanted that person to wake up as soon as possible.

At this point, Kazuto has already reached a point where her hand can no longer reach his heart.

Now, they are even more like a true brother and sister. In that case, she wished she had never realized her feelings. Her feeling of wanting to keep Kazuto for herself could never come true.

Lying on her bed, watching her ALfheim poster, Suguha wondered why people didn't have wings in the real world. In reality, if we could fly freely in the sky, then it might be possible to untangle the threads binding her heart.

* * *

I sat on my chair looking at where the Sylph girl, Lyfa, had been sitting a few minutes ago with a slightly confused expression.

"What happened to her?"

After hearing this, Yui, who still sat on my shoulder, tilted her head with a puzzled expression and said:

"Who knows, the me right now has no mental monitoring capabilities."

"Hmm. Well, I appreciate her offer to show me the way."

"I know the map. It's true our battle potential will increase with more people, but..."

Yui stood up, put her face to my ear, and said:

"Papa, you shouldn't cheat."

"I won't, I won't!!"

Seeing me shake my head after that warning, Yui took off and landed on the table while laughing, and picked up the half-eaten biscuit with two hands.

"Damn, actually teasing me huh!"

I picked up my spiced wine and drank from it from the bottle.

But, I should really be wary. It's not about cheating, she is— Lyfa is, only a character in the game, she may have a different personality in reality.

For a very long time, the virtual world was my reality. However, the idea of character division was meaningless, malice and goodwill were all real. I wouldn't have survived if I hadn't thought like that.

But things are different here. Players are, in a way, somewhat different. They come here and assume different roles with different values. Thieves assault, rob, kill but conversely, they are not punished for it, but respected.

"It's very difficult, VRMMOs."

I unconsciously sighed at the words I spoke with a bitter smile. After putting down the empty bottle, I picked up Yui who was eating the biscuit about the same size as her, and put her on my shoulder. I left the table and decided to go back to the real world.

In MMORPGs, there is a conflict between convenience and fairness when the time comes to «Logout».

In other words, it has to be made so people who have pressing business like an appointment or have to take care of feeling physiological needs can quickly leave the game. But, on the other hand, it must be set-up so it can't be used to escape from combat situations or prevent theft. For this reason, most MMOs set certain restrictions or conditions for logging out. ALO is no exception, players are able to logout from anywhere only in their race territory. Outside of that, their character will remain in a 'soulless' state for several minutes and will be vulnerable to attack and theft.

Outside of your race territory, if you want instant logout, you have to use items like camping equipment or rent a room. I decided to follow Lyfa's advice to use the second floor of "Lily of the Valley Pavilion" to logout.

After checking in at the counter, I climbed the stairs to the second floor. I opened the door of the specified room, it revealed a very simple room with only a bed and a table. It was a sight that gave me a very strong sense of déjà vu. Before I bought a house in Aincrad, I often used these kind of rooms.

I opened the window to let in fresh air. At this point I would be able to logout without worrying, but in the end chose to use the "sleep off" method to exit. So I removed my weapon and laid down on the bed.

A small problem occurs when playing VR games using FullDive. When you play FullDive games, your senses are brought to virtual reality, so when you logout your senses are returned to your real body. So, if you suddenly change standing to lying down, then there will be a strong sense of vertigo. There was a time before playing SAO when I was using a flight simulator with FullDive, I was rapidly spinning in a nose dive when I pressed the

logout button and returned to reality, I emerged with an extreme sense of vertigo and my eyes where cruelly spinning.

To prevent such symptoms it is best to sign out with the "sleep off" approach, in other words, fall asleep. When you fall asleep in the virtual world you are automatically logged out and sent back to the real world.

I laid in bed as Yui finished her biscuit and settled to the floor with a gentle pitter-patter sound. Upon landing, Yui returned to her original form with her long raven hair, snow white dress, and wonderful scent drifting on the air.

Yui, with her hands clasped behind her back, turned to me and said:

"...I won't see you until tomorrow right? Papa."

"...I'm sorry...we finally managed to meet. I'll be back soon...back to see Yui."

"That..."

Yui blinked, her face flushed.

"Papa, until you logout can we sleep together?"

"Eh."

I had a self-conscious smile on my face. I am Papa for Yui to the last. As an AI, she is constantly looking to expand her experience by exposure to new data. So such a request doesn't upset me, however, her attitude and words are enough to stagger me. But still, I think she is a lovely girl.

"I get it, yes you can."

I pushed my embarrassment to the side and moved to the wall to make room for her to lie down. Yui, who had a glistening smile, jumped into bed.

As her face snuggled against my chest, I slowly stroked her hair and whispered:

"I'll rescue Asuna quickly and then let's go buy a house in this world as well. Are there player homes in this game?"

Yui turned her head to one side and began to nod rapidly and said:

"It seems quite expensive, but it is available. It seems like a dream, for the three of us, me and papa and mama to be living together again."

Recalling those days, my heart felt as though it had been twisted yet again. It was clearly just a few months ago that we were still together, but now I have no means whatsoever to communicate with her. Just like this, that distant memory gradually moved even further away—

I hugged Yui tightly, my eyes slowly closing, and whispered:

"It is not just a dream, I will soon make it reality."

Because I had been playing the game too long, even if it is just a virtual experience, my brain was getting tired and exhaustion hit me like a sledgehammer.

"Good night, Papa."

As my consciousness slowly slipped into warm darkness, the sound of Yui's silvery voice at my side continued to comfort me.

Chapter 3

A bird was singing a song that filled the morning as it perched upon the white table.

Her right hand quietly extended, and her outstretched fingers gently touched the jade-like feathers of the bird, instantly causing the bird to take flight without a sound. The bird drew an arc flying up, and it flapped away in the direction from which the sun shone.

Rising from her chair, she took a few steps forward as if she wanted to follow the bird. But instantly, a sparkling, golden grid appeared, blocking her way. The bird continued flying through the gaps and into freedom. Higher and higher, further and further, it was going away to anywhere.

Asuna stood still and watched as the bird grew smaller and smaller until it melded with the colors of the sky, and she slowly returned to the chair and sat down.

The table and chairs, built of pure-white marble, were cold and hard. Beside the table and chairs rested a luxurious bed of the same white color. The furniture was the only thing in this "room," if you could call it that...

The floor was covered with tiles that also shine white. Walking from one side to the other took about twenty steps, but this round room was also surrounded by walls formed by a shining golden grid. The bars of her cage were set apart wide enough for Asuna to fit through them, but the system makes escape impossible.

The criss-crossing golden bars extended upwards, leaning in to form a dome. A huge ring extended from the top of the dome, and a fat tree branch threaded through it to support the entire structure. That branch extended to the sky and was part of a huge tree.

In other words, this strange room was actually a cage. It was a birdcage of unimaginable scale, but one where even the birds were free to come and go. The only person who faced the hardships of a prisoner was Asuna. Therefore, this should be called a prison.

The room was luxurious, elegant, and beautiful, yet it was a very cold tree prison.

About sixty days had passed since Asuna awakened in this place. Well, that's not even a reliable number. There is nothing to write with in this place. The days also seem to be much shorter than twenty-four hours. Even so, her internal clock makes her wake up regardless of whether it is day or night.

After waking, she would ask herself how many days it has been, but lately, she cannot even be sure of the number. For all she knows, she might have repeated the same day many times, or several years may have already passed. The longer she is trapped here, the more her memories of the time she spent with «him» seem to fade.

That time...

When Aincrad collapsed, the world was shrouded in an explosion of light. Before disappearing, Asuna and Kirito had clung together and waited until the moment they lost consciousness.

She had felt no fear. There was a conviction that she did what had to be done and had lived a life with nothing to regret. To disappear with him was a very gratifying ending, Asuna had thought.

Wrapped in the light of their intertwined souls, it didn't matter when their bodies disappeared.

When his warmth disappeared, Asuna was instantly shrouded in darkness. She reached out her hand, desperately shouting his name. But she had become caught in a relentless torrent that dragged her further into the dark. Then there were intermittent flashes of light. Not knowing where she was being transported, Asuna had screamed. Finally, a rainbow-colored brilliance appeared before her. The iridescent light spread toward her, and she fell into this place.

Hanging on a wall and supporting the Gothic-style bed was a gigantic mirror. Reflected there was a form subtly different from the one she knew. Her face, and her chestnut hair, were the same as before. But she was wearing a thin, one piece white dress that she thought was flimsy. Decorating the top of the dress, right above her chest was a blood-red ribbon. The cold piercing her bare feet told her the tiles were made of marble. She didn't have a single weapon on her back, but a mysterious transparent substance extends from her back in the shape of wings. They are more like the wings of insects than birds.

At first, she truly thought that she had come to the life after death. But now, she understood that this was not the case. Although she had tried waving her hand, she is unable to call up the menu window. This is not Aincrad but a new illusionary world, a computer-generated virtual prison. Asuna has been imprisoned here by a man's malice.

Since this is the case, she could not let herself be defeated. Her mind refused to be broken by his malice. By remembering this, Asuna endured loneliness and anxiety every passing day. But now, her determination has started to crumble. Despair has slowly seeped into her heart.

Asuna sat on the cold chair with her hands folded on the table, and she felt a turmoil in her heart as she constantly thought of him.

'Quickly...quickly come and save me, Kirito-kun...'

"That is a most beautiful expression, Titania."

Suddenly a voice sounded inside the bird cage.

"It is the face of someone about to cry. I'd like to freeze that expression, make a decoration out of it."

"Then go ahead and do it."

Asuna said, turning to face the direction the voice had come from.

From the edge of the golden cage and in the direction of the giant tree known as the «World Tree» was a door. The door opened out onto a staircase carved from another branch that bridged the distance between her cage and the trunk of the tree.

The door opened to reveal a tall man.

His gold, wavy hair flowed out from under a round silver crown that sat at the top. He was dressed in a fine, green silk mantle that was decorated with silver embroidery. Like Asuna, he, too, had wings, but his were not transparent; they were more like those of a huge butterfly. The four parts of his wings shifted between a color of black velvet and emerald-green.

His face had a beauty that could only be artificial. With a smooth forehead, a high slender nose, and eyes with irises in the same color and pattern as his wings, he was extremely handsome. However, his thin lips, twisted in

an expression of utter contempt and distorted by a smile that despised everything, completely destroyed such beauty.

When Asuna saw this man, she turned away as though she had seen something filthy. She said in a flat tone:

"...You can do whatever you want as the system administrator. Do as you wish."

"Saying such a heartless thing again. Thus far, have I forced myself on you, Titania?"

"You can still say that even after locking me in here? Stop with the strange names; I am Asuna, Oberon... rather, Sugou-san."

Asuna looked up at Sugou Nobuyuki's current incarnation, «Fairy King Oberon». But this time, she didn't avert her eyes and returned his gaze with a powerful glare.

Twisting his lips in a disgusted expression, he mirthlessly said:

"Wake up already. In this world, I am Oberon the Fairy King, and you're the queen Titania. We are the players' envy, ALfheim's masters, and you shall eventually open up your heart to me.. as my partner."

"No matter how long you wait, it will be in vain. The only things I will ever give to you are my contempt and hatred."

"Well, how stubborn."

Oberon slowly extended his right hand to the side of Asuna's face, laughing.

"It is... I feel that these days..."

He tries to make Asuna face him, but she turns away.

"Then again, it's okay to make you obey by force too. It might even be more fun that way."

Asuna`s face became caught in his vice-like grip, and the fingers of his left hand approached slowly, touching her cheek as he slowly moved his fingers toward her lips. A shiver ran down Asuna`s back from this disgusting feeling.

Asuna's eyes filled with disgust, and she clenched her teeth and tightened her lips to a thin line. Oberon`s fingers repeatedly slid over her lips before they moved slowly down her neck. When they finally reached her chest, his fingers tightened on the bright red ribbon. As he enjoyed Asuna's shame and fear, his hands grasped the ribbon by one end, and slowly, slowly pulled...

"Stop!"

Unable to endure more of his touch, Asuna's voice finally leaked from her mouth.

Hearing her voice, Oberon cooed deep in his throat, but he still removed his fingers from the ribbon. He wagged his fingers before he said with a laugh:

"Just kidding. Didn't I already mention it? I will not force you. Anyway, when the times comes, you'll beg me for it anyway. It's only a matter of time."

"So foolish, do you really think that will happen?"

"Are you certain I'm just 'being foolish'? Soon you will accept my feelings, Titania."

Oberon placed both hands on the table and leaned forward suggestively. Revealing a shadowed grin, he looked outside of the birdcage.

"You see tens of thousands of people dive into and enjoy playing a game in this vast world. But alas, they are unaware. The «FULLDIVE» system was not developed just for the entertainment industry!"

At these unexpected words, Asuna became silent. Oberon spread open his arms in a theatrical gesture.

"I'm not joking! This game is merely a by-product. The FullDive machine interface, in other words the Nerve Gear and Amusphere, has a limited scope, so electronic signals focus the role of the brain's sensory sphere in order to give the illusion of environmental signals. But what happens when that limiter is removed?"

Oberon`s green eyes were full of hidden evil and ambition. Asuna instinctively flinched away in fear.

"...That is, the functions of the brain outside the sensory processing include thought, emotion, and memory. Without the limiter, these can be controlled!"

Such insanity from Oberon left Asuna speechless. After breathing a few times, she somehow managed to squeeze out her voice. "Such, such things will never be permitted..."

"Who is it that 'will not allow it'? This type of research is already being conducted in many countries. However, such a study needs human subjects to carry out the experiment. Also, what a person thinks about can only be described in words!"

Oberon gave a shrill laugh and leapt away from the table, and, after adjusting his posture, walked around Asuna.

"There are a lot of individual processes in higher-order brain function, so it is necessary to procure a large number of test-subjects. But, because this is recording the brain's behavior, it requires repeated tests, and human experimentation is not allowed. That's why this study has progressed so slowly. But one day, as I was watching the news, I found a way to get as many subjects as I would ever need, the ten thousand people!"

The hair on the back of Asuna`s neck stood on end. Oberon didn't have to say it; she could already imagine what he was going to say.

"Kayaba-senpai... he was a genius, but he was also a fool. He obviously had the ability, but he was content with just creating a game world. Even

then, his SAO server could not be touched. But the moment the players were liberated, I was able to take part of that world as mine by hacking into it through the router; it was that easy."

Making a movement like he was holding a goblet, the fairy king put out his hand and swirled it, as though he were going to drink an invisible wine.

"Well, waiting for the game to be cleared took a long time. But even though I couldn't get everyone, I managed to obtain 300 test subjects. In reality, there is no facility that could store that many people, but virtual reality has more than enough room!"

Oberon continued rattling off his delusions. From the beginning, Asuna had hated this about his character.

"Thanks to the 300 players from the old SAO server, our research has made great progress in just two months! Embedding new objects in memories, techniques for inducing emotion... this technology has largely taken shape. The manipulation of the soul – truly wonderful!"

"This kind of study... do you think my father would allow it?"

"That old man has no idea, of course. This study is being conducted by a very small team and in absolute secrecy. It would otherwise become quite the commodity."

"Commodity...!?"

"A certain American company is practically drooling as it waits for this research to finish. I plan to sell technology at a very high price. Anyway, it will all be owned by RECTO, and RECTO will eventually become mine."

"..."

"I will soon became a part of the Yuuki family. First, as an adopted son, I would qualify as the successor to RECTO. As your spouse, that is only fitting. I thought it was not a bad idea for us to have a rehearsal right here and now."

A sense of disgust caused a cold shudder down her back, and Asuna slowly but very firmly shook her head.

"That is one thing I absolutely will not allow. On the day that I return to reality, I will shed light on these atrocities."

"Good grief, you still do not understand. I keep speaking freely only because you'll soon forget it all! All that is left will be..."

Oberon suddenly stopped; he tilted his head and fell silent. Then, shaking his left hand to open the window, he turned toward it and gave instructions.

"I'm coming now; wait for instructions."

The window disappeared, and he turned back to Asuna with grin.

"Be warned, for the day you fall blindly in love with me is fast approaching. Either you submit to me now, or I turn your brain into a stage for one of my experiments. So next time you see me, please be a little more submissive, Titania."

After stroking Asuna`s hair as though she were a cat, he turned away.

With her head bowed down, Asuna did not watch Oberon leave. Her mind kept replaying Oberon's last words and the horror they engendered.

'Click!' echoed through the room as the door locked itself, once again leaving only silence.

* * *

After changing back into her uniform, Suguha left the kendo clubroom. A burst of refreshing wind caressed her cheeks as she walked between the school buildings with her bamboo sword held loosely in hand.

It was half-past-one, but, because fifth period classes had already begun, the school was very quiet. At this time, first- and second-year students were in class, but third-year students could freely choose when to attend until they begun to focus on tutorial lectures for high school entrance examinations. Only people like Suguha, who already had a recommendation, were walking around.

She had leisure time, but people who are in the same year would often say sarcastic words when they met. Suguha generally does not go to school without a reason. Her kendo teacher is a strict but warm-hearted instructor. He cares about his beloved disciple, who had been recommended admission to a top-ranking school. Still, Suguha continued coming to school every day to follow his strict training.

According to him, Suguha had recently developed a subtle habit. After hearing this, Suguha thought about what might have caused it. It was probably because she enters the world of ALfheim and trains in aerial combat every day, albeit for a short time.

However, he never said that it made her worse or that it gave her a harder time. And today, she was even able to get two points off the 30-year-old male advisor, who was also one of the highest-ranked kendo practitioners in the country.

She didn't know why, but she recently seemed to be able to read her opponents' attacks more easily. Whenever she fought a strong enemy, her nerves would strain, and the flow of time seemed to slow and made everything seem much more intense.

She remembered an incident a few days ago when she had sparred with Kazuto. At that time, he had dodged one of her best attacks, one that people can't easily escape. That kind of superb responsiveness made it seem like he was experiencing it at a completely different rate than she was. Perhaps, Suguha suddenly considered, FullDive experiences affected the physical body.

She became lost in thought as she made her way to the bike rack until someone suddenly called to her from the shadows.

"Lyfa-chan."

"Wha..!"

Suguha jumped forward a step in surprise. A somewhat-thin boy wearing glasses had appeared from in front of her. He and Recon shared the common characteristic of lowering the eyebrows when troubled, but, right now, the angle of the eyebrows was even more tilted.

Suguha placed her right hand on her hip and spoke with a little sigh in her voice.

"Do not call me that while at school!"

"S...sorry, Suguha-chan!"

"That's..."

Suguha used one hand to remove the cover of her bamboo sword case before stepping forward. The boy showed a helpless smile and quickly shook his head.

"Right, I'm sorry, Kirigaya-san."

"What's going on, Nagata-san?"

"I need to speak with you; is there somewhere we can go to talk casually?"

"Here is good."

Shinichi Nagata made a miserable face and dropped his shoulders.

"Anyway, you already have a recommendation, so why did you still come to school?"

"Ah, Sugu—, Kirigaya-san, I wanted to talk to you. I had waited here since early this morning."

"Gah! You sure have lots of time."

Suguha took a few steps back and kneeled down next to a relatively high flower bed.

"What do you want to talk about?"

Nagata Shinichi sat down and, maintaining a certain distance from Suguha, said:

"Sigurd and the others want to go hunting tomorrow afternoon. There are some underwater caves, so Salamanders rarely go there."

"I told you, I prefer talking about hunting by e-mail. Anyway, I'm sorry, but I won't be participating for a while."

"Eh.. eh!? Why?"

"I'm going to Aarun."

Towering in the center of ALfheim is the world tree, and near its base lies the great neutral city, Aarun. Sylvian is a considerable distance from Aarun. It is a trip that would take several days, especially because there were areas where flight was not possible.

Nagata Shinichi stiffened for a moment but then drew closer to her and asked:

"Are you going with that Spriggan from yesterday?"

"Ah, yeah. I promised I would show him around."

"You.. you're not thinking right! I don't know why you're spending your nights with that strange guy!"

"Why are you blushing? Don't imagine weird things!"

She took her shinai and pressed it against his chest. Nagata`s eyebrows painfully drooped to their limit, and he looked at Suguha with resentment.

"I have asked you before if you wanted to go to Aarun with me, but you objected very firmly."

"That's because we'd be wiped out, no matter how many times I go with you. Anyway, that's my reason, so tell Sigurd for me."

Suguha stood up, bid him a "see you," and went straight to the bike rack. Nagata's pitiful expression, like that of a dog that was struck after a scolding, pained her a bit. Even so, rumors were already circulating around school. She doesn't want to appear any closer to him.

'I am just showing him the way, that's all.'

She told herself this to calm her beating heart. But when she thought of the teen named Kirito, his mysterious black eyes made it impossible for her to calm down.

Quickly removing the lock on her bike, which was parked in a corner of the vast parking lot, she pedaled away. The cold winter air blew across her cheeks, but Suguha simply ignored it. Leaving through the back gate of the school, she rode down a steep slope without worrying about using her breaks.

'Fly fast,' was what Suguha was thinking. Flying together with Kirito at top speed... she was getting excited just thinking about it.

Suguha arrived home shortly before two.

Kazuto's bike wasn't in the garden, he must not have returned from the gym yet.

Recently, Kazuto seemed to have recovered the physical abilities he had had before the SAO incident. But he was not satisfied, feeling a disparity in physical capabilities between his body in reality and in the virtual world.

This is definitely understandable, considering that it is impossible to replicate the abilities of a virtual character with a living body. Even Suguha understood that, as she had nearly fallen down once or twice when she had expected to catch herself with the «Flight» ability.

Stepping into the house from the porch, Suguha went into the laundry room, put her clothes into the washing machine, and pressed the ON switch. She then entered her room, where she took off her gray sailor shirt and skirt and hung them on the wall hook.

Suguha put her hand over her chest while standing in her underwear. Although she had returned home from school by riding her bike at high-speeds, her heart rate should have settled down shortly. But it is still around ninety beats per minute now.

That was not all due to exercise, but she wanted to confirm it. Suguha tried taking deep breaths to calm herself down, but her thoughts kept her BPM high. 'What was I thinking, ah, it's not that I don`t want to take him to Aarun, but I already have my brother... Really, I don't know why I'm thinking this... I'm so stupidstupidstupid!'

Coming to the conclusion that she was being stupid with her feelings, she put on a large t-shirt and shorts and settled down on her bed.

She took the Amusphere helmet off the shelf, turned it on, put it on her head, and closed her eyes. Then, after taking a deep breath, she intoned a magical spell:

"LINK START!"

After passing through the connection process and moving her consciousness to the body of the fairy swordswoman Lyfa, she opened her eyes to the Lily of the Valley Pavillion.

No one sat at the other side of the table, of course. The meeting time wouldn't be close for a while. There was plenty of time to make preparations for the journey.

Leaving the shop, the city of Sylvain was covered in a beautiful sunrise.

In consideration of those who can only log-in under specific time constraints each day, a day in ALfheim lasted only sixteen real hours long. Therefore, time here was often inconsistent with reality. The menu window has a real time display next to the ALfheim time, so people don't lose track of time; it was initially somewhat confusing, but Lyfa learned to like it.

She went around to a few shops, bought a lot of things, and got back with a little time to spare. Returning to the inn, she pushed open the door and noticed that a black figure had begun materializing at a table.

Kirito completed logging in and blinked a few times before smiling as he noticed Lyfa approaching.

"Hey, you're early."

"Yeah, I got here some time ago. I did a little shopping."

"Ah, is that so... It seems like I need to prepare too."

"I bought some general items, so you don't need worry about that, but..."

She examined Kirito`s shabby starting armor and sword.

"You'll need better equipment for yourself."

"I think so, too. I definitely think this sword is very unreliable."

"About money.. do you have any? If not, I can lend you some."

"Well..."

Kirito summoned his menu window by waving his left hand, but, after a glance, his face became stiff.

"Is it this «Yurudo» thing?"

"Yes, it is. Do you not have any money?"

"No, no, I have some.. quite a lot of it."

"Then let's go to the equipment shop!"

"Alright."

At that moment, Kirito stood up in panic, searching his body until he finally looked in his breast pocket.

"Hey, Yui, we're going."

As she climbed out of the pocket, the black-haired pixie's face appeared, looking a little sleepy and stretching into a huge yawn.

Lyfa brought Kirito to the equipment shops, but, by the time they had finished outfitting him, the streets were wrapped in the morning light.

Kirito's armor was easy enough to find, it being a pair of pants, a shirt with strengthened defensive attributes, long coat that covered him. However, Kirito had spent a long time choosing a sword, seeming unsatisfied no matter which sword he examined.

The shopkeeper would hand him a sword, Kirito would play with it before handing it back saying, "It needs to be heavier," and the process would

repeat. Kirito eventually came to one that suited his taste, a great sword about as tall as him, and bought it. It was a tapered blade with a shiny black sheen that revealed an unusual weight. This was probably equipment made for an Imp or Gnome, the tall races that used these swords.

In ALO, the amount of damage dealt was determined by «Weapon Attack Power» and «Sword Swing Speed». To the player, Sylphs and Cait Siths were more favorable for speed, supplementing damage dealt with their superior speed. But power-type players could easily equip the weapons that were enormous in size and strength. This trade-off of power and speed created a balance between the different races in the game.

Sylphs with high enough skill could equip hammers and axes, but the Sylphs' hidden and permanent strength parameter didn't allow them to use those weapons effectively. Spriggans were a multi-weapon race, but Kirito, no matter how one looked at him, had a speed-type body.

"That kind of sword, will you be able to use it properly?"

Hearing Lyfa's amazed question, Kirito just nodded with a cool expression.

"That won't be a problem."

Since he was saying it was okay, she had to accept it. After paying for the sword, he hung the sheath onto his back, but because of its length, the tip almost brushed the ground.

Kirito now looked like a child imitating a swordsman and, thinking of this, Lyfa had to hold back her smile as she said: "Well, now our preparations are complete! So now, for a while, I'll be in your care."

Lyfa offered her right hand to Kirito, and, smiling shyly, Kirito also stretched out his right hand; the two shook hands.

"I as well, so please support me."

Flying out of the pocket, Yui tapped their clasped hands and said:

"Let's do our best! Our target is the World Tree!"

Burdened with a giant sword strapped to his back and Yui sitting on his shoulder, Kirito followed Lyfa until they came to a beautiful, shining, emerald-green tower.

This was the symbol of the Sylphs, the «Tower of the Wind». No matter how many times you saw it, the beauty of the tower was stunning. As she thought this, Lyfa turned to the side to see the black-clothed Spriggan glaring at the tower with an undisguised disgust. Lyfa suppressed a smile and said to him.

"Before we leave, do you want to practice braking?"

"...It's all right; from now on, I've decided to fly safely."

Kirito answered with a helpless expression.

"Also, why are we coming to the tower? Do you have business here?"

"I have no other business, but, before you start a long-distance flight, it is better to begin at higher points. You can use the height to your advantage."

"Ah, I see."

She pushed the nodding Kirito from the back and started walking forward.

"Let's go! I want to get through the forest before night arrives."

"I am not very familiar with the terrain. Could you lead the way?"

"Leave it to me!"

Lyfa patted her chest and turned to look into the depths of the tower.

There stood the Lord's beautiful mansion in morning sunlight. The Sylph Lord Sakuya was a female player she had known since a while ago. 'Since I will be leaving town for a while, I should tell her,' Lyfa suddenly thought. But the flag pole rising from the center of the building wasn't displaying the Sylph flag. This was rare, meaning that Sakuya was not home today.

"Is something wrong?"

Kirito tilted his head to ask, but Lyfa shook her head, deciding she would e-mail Sakuya later. They passed through the front door of the Tower of the Wind and went inside.

The first floor had a vast, circular lobby with shops of all kinds along the outer wall. The lobby had two mana-driven elevators in the very center that, from time to time, would suck-in or spit-out players. In ALfheim, dawn had just passed, while in reality, night was approaching. This meant that the number of players online would soon begin increasing by the minute.

She held Kirito`s hand and headed towards the right elevator that was just coming down.

Suddenly, several players appeared in front of them, blocking their way. Lyfa nearly fell, but her wings spread and steadied her.

"That was a little dangerous, wasn't it?"

Lyfa complained reflexively, but the tall man blocking her way turned out to be a familiar face.

He stood taller than the average Sylph and had a rough yet handsome face that was the result of tremendous luck or considerable investments. His body was wrapped around some heavy silver armor, and a huge broad sword hung at his waist. His wide forehead was split by a circlet, and dark green hair fell down to his shoulders. This man, whose name was Sigurd, was the vanguard of the party Lyfa had been with for the past few weeks. She saw his party members with him. Thinking that Recon might also be here, Lyfa looked around but couldn't see his eye-catching yellow-green hair.

Lyfa and Sigurd often competed for the title of the strongest Sylph swordsman. He was also a powerful politician, a part of the mainstream bureaucracy that the often shy Lyfa stayed out of. Although the current «Sylph Lord», a player chosen by a vote once a month and who also decided things like how to spend player-collected taxes, was Sakuya, Sigurd, whose fame was about even with Sakuya's, was also a part of that group of super-active players.

His massive gaming time also meant that his rare equipment and skill proficiency were far beyond Lyfa's. In a one-on-one match, Lyfa needed all of her superior maneuverability to win, and even then, it was still hard for her to overcome his strong defenses. But during a hunt, he (the vanguard), was a reliable partner. However, his self-righteous speech and attitude grated on Lyfa, who disliked restraint. Thus, although the present party was very efficient in hunting, she had been thinking that the time had been coming for her to leave it.

As he stood in front of Lyfa, Sigurd's posture displayed his arrogance to its maximum. 'It seems things will become very troublesome'— thinking of this, Lyfa opened her mouth and said:

"Good morning, Sigurd."

Despite Lyfa having greeted him with a smiling face, Sigurd was not in the mood to answer. Instead, he replied in a strained tone:

"You want to leave the party, Lyfa?"

Sigurd looked to be in an extremely foul mood; Lyfa had considered telling him that this was just a trip to and from Aarun, but, since it had become so troublesome, she instead nodded her head.

"Yeah, sort of. I was able to save plenty of money, so I'll be taking it easy for a while."

"How selfish; what about the other party members?"

"Selfish!?"

That recalled a memory in Lyfa. After a recent «Duel Event» where she defeated him after a fierce fight, Sigurd had invited her to join his party. Lyfa had accepted the offer on two conditions: she would only participate when she could, and she would be able to quit if she wanted to. Specifically, she had wanted him to know that she didn't want to be tied down with responsibilities.

Sigurd lifted his eyebrows as his words continued:

"You are a well-known member of my team. If you suddenly go and join another team, it would be like you threw mud on my face!"

"..."

Lyfa was rendered speechless by Sigurd's holier-than-thou speech. 'So that's how it really is,' she thought.

Lyfa suddenly remembered Recon's rare but serious advice after he had joined Sigurd's party as her partner.

Recon had told her to avoid getting too deeply involved. The reason was that Sigurd didn't want Lyfa for her strength, he wanted her for his party's fame. That is, he wanted to be in command of the one that had beat him so that he wouldn't lose respect.

'How could that happen,' Lyfa had laughed, but Recon had remained very persuasive: 'ALO is a difficult MMO game. As such, female players are so scarce that players have a tendency to idolize them, even if they lack combat ability. Especially you; since Lyfa-chan is such a sweet girl, you are

rarer than some piece of legendary equipment that most want to own. In reality, he wants to use your presence in his team to show off and increase his status.'

Recon had said more gibberish, but Lyfa had thrown him a withering look over her shoulder and quieted him down before she seriously thought about it. But being an idol wasn't something she understood. For an MMORPG that had much to remember, she didn't want to complicate things, so she had stopped thinking about it. So far, she had remained as a member of the party without any significant problems, until today...

Looking at the angry Sigurd in front of her, Lyfa felt as though a constricting thread had painfully wrapped around her body. The main reason she played ALO was to escape all the shackles and restraints of reality, to experience flying unfettered through the sky.

But perhaps she was too ignorant, too naive. Even if everyone in the virtual world had wings, forgetting gravity was merely an illusion.

Lyfa / Suguha, recalled how, in elementary school, an upperclassman in kendo had bullied her. Although the upperclassman had been a champion since entering kendo, he couldn't beat the younger Suguha during a match. He later took revenge, attacking Suguha on her way home with the help of several friends... a shameful deed. What he had done then was like Sigurd's attitude was now, full of anger and resentment.

The results would be the same here...

Lyfa, overwhelmed by despair, bowed her head down. At this time, from behind her like a shadow and unnoticed until now, Kirito spoke up:

"Companions are not items to be used!"

"Whaa...?"

For a second, Lyfa didn't understand the meaning of this sentence. Then, Lyfa's eyes opened wide and looked at Kirito. Sigurd's voice increased in volume:

"What!?"

Kirito stepped in between Lyfa and Sigurd, and he looked Sigurd in the eye, even though Sigurd was a head taller than him. "I'm saying, you shouldn't look at other players like an important sword or armor that can be locked into an equipment slot."

"Wha... you dare to..."

At Kirito's straightforward words, Sigurd suddenly flushed bright red, and he rolled up his cloak as he moved his hand toward the hilt of his sword.

"You do not understand the situation, you filthy Spriggan! Lyfa, are you going to work with this guy now?! He's probably a «Renegade» that came here after being banished from his own territory!"

Sigurd assumed a posture to draw his sword. As he said those words, Lyfa finally lost her temper and shouted back:

"Do not say such rude words to Kirito-kun! He is my new partner!"

"What...what do you mean?"

With veins throbbing on his forehead, Sigurd replied in flustered consternation.

"Lyfa, do you mean to abandon this territory...?"

At those words, Lyfa's eyes opened wide.

ALO players are generally divided into two categories of play style.

The first use their own territory as a base, partner within their race, and give a part of the money they earn as taxes to further the development of the ethnic forces. Lyfa and Sigurd are this type of player. The other type leave their territory, use a neutral city as a base, and form parties with players of different races. The former tend to hold the latter in contempt, as the latter often lacked a sense of purpose, were abandoned and disdained, or were exiled from their race's territory as Renegades.

In Lyfa's case, her sense of being a Sylph was weak, as was her sense of belonging to this community. The reason she has stayed in Sylvain is half because of its beauty and half because she didn't want to move. But now, thanks to Sigurd's remarks, a desire to become free quickly emerged.

"Yes, right. I intend to leave here," Lyfa blurted out without thinking.

Sigurd's mouth distorted in anger, his teeth biting his lip. He suddenly drew his broad sword, glaring furiously at Kirito.

"I was going to leave you alone since you are a worm crawling around in front of me. But if you are a thief, you would do well not to be so arrogant.

Walking leisurely around the territory of other races, I can cut you up any way I want without any complaint from you, isn't that right?"

Despite Sigurd's dramatic words and behavior, Kirito only slightly shrugged his shoulders.

Kirito was truly a fearless person, and even Lyfa was shocked. She prepared to fight against Sigurd, moving her hand to the sword at her waist. The air around them suddenly became tense.

At this point, Sigurd's partner moved up and whispered some words to him:

"Bad news, Sigurd. If you kill a defenseless opponent like that in front of so many people..."

Somehow, a circle of onlookers had already surrounded them, drawn by the signs of trouble. If this was a formal duel, or if he were an actual Spriggan spy, then fine. But it would be dishonorable if Sigurd instigated a fight with a tourist like Kirito, who can't even fight back in this area.

Sigurd bared his teeth in frustration and stared down Kirito before sheathing his sword.

"It would be best if we ran away and hid, Lyfa."

Ignoring Kirito's words, Sigurd returned his attention back to Lyfa.

"Because you betrayed me.. sooner or later you will regret this."

"I would have regretted it more if I stayed longer."

"If you ever wish to come back, you had better return on your knees."

Having finished, Sigurd turned and walked toward the exit of the tower. The two players accompanying Sigurd looked in her direction for a moment as though they wanted to say something, but they gave up and turned to leave.

After all three of them disappeared, Lyfa took a deep breath, looked at Kirito, and said:

"Sorry to get you involved in such a strange event..."

"No, no, it seems like I became the oil that was poured on this fire of a situation. But is this really okay with you? Giving up your territory?"

"Ah."

Unsure of what to say, Lyfa pushed Kirito's back and moved toward the elevator. After forcing their way through the crowd, they reached the elevator, and she pressed the button for the top floor. From the bottom of the translucent glass shaft, came a disc-shaped stone; a green light slowly engulfed it, and they began rising rapidly after stepping into it.

When the elevator stopped, the glass wall opened without a sound, and the white light of the morning sun and a refreshing wind poured into the room.

Leaving the shaft, she walked out onto the observation platform from the top of the tower briskly. She has been here many times in the past, but the vast panorama that stretched in all directions still made her heart soar in exhilaration.

Sylph territory was in the southwest part of ALfheim. To the west was a grassland that opens into the infinitely bright, blue sea. To the east was a deep forest that surrounded the lilac-covered mountains, and on the far side of the mountains, rising high into the sky and uniting everything in its shadow was the World Tree.

"Wow... what an amazing view...!"

Following Lyfa from the elevator, Kirito`s eyes opened wide as he looked at the scenery.

"The sky seems so close that you could almost reach out your hand to grasp it."

Seeing his eyes reflecting the scenery, Lyfa looked out with Kirito, raised her head, and looked up to the blue sky, stretching her right hand out toward the sky and saying:

"That's right. Compared to the sky, everything else seems very small."

"..."

Somewhat surprised at the sudden smile Kirito gave her, Lyfa then answered his smile, and continued:

"This is a great opportunity. I always planned to fly from here one day. Then, I had been scared to do it alone, and I couldn't easily muster the determination necessary."

"Is that so? But, this became a fighting goodbye somehow."

"In that state, I would have not been able to leave peacefully anyway. Why..."

Lyfa remarks, half to herself.

"Why am I still tied and bound even though I have wings..."

The answer to Lyfa's words came not from Kirito but from the one sitting on his shoulder, the pixie named Yui, who had just climbed out from under his coat collar.

"Being a human is complicated."

Yui answered in a silver bell-like tone; then she flew up and landed on the other side of Kirito to sit down before she took his ear in her hand and whispered:

"This kind of complex human behaviour, the desire for others, I cannot understand the psychology behind it."

For a moment, Lyfa forgot that the other was a program, stared straight at Yui`s face.

"The desire?"

"I understand that the impulse to seek another's heart is a basic behavioral principle of humans. And that's considering what I am based from. If it were up to me..."

Yui suddenly clung to Kirito's face with both hands and kissed him soundly.

"I would do this. A very simple demonstration."

Seeing what Yui just did, Lyfa`s eyes went wide; with a wry smile, Kirito poked Yui on the forehead with the tip of a finger. "But the human world is more complex than that. If you did it that directly, it would be considered harassment, and you would be banned."

"It needs style and dignity, right?"

"... I'm begging you: don't go remembering strange things."

Lyfa was amazed, and she kept watching Kirito and Yui as they talked until she finally opened her mouth and said:

"That AI is really incredible. Are all «Private Pixies» like that?"

"This one is especially strange."

Kirito said as he took Yui by her collar and placed her back in his breast pocket.

"But is it alright to desire another person's heart?"

Lyfa mulled Yui's words as she stretched.

Then, even my feelings of wanting to fly to anywhere I want in this world, deep inside, they mean that I just want to find someone? Inadvertently, her mind flashed and Kazuto`s face appeared, causing her heart to suddenly thump.

Could this be why I want to use the fairy wings, so that I can fly over obstacles in the real world and finally go into Kazuto's arms? Is that what I really want...?

"I could never..."

She was thinking too much, she decided. 'Right now, I simply want to fly. That's it.'

"Did you say something?"

"No, it's nothing. Let's hurry up and depart."

Lyfa smiled at Kirito, and she looked up towards the sky. It was the dawn of a brilliant sky, and, at the touch of the golden sun, the clouds gradually dispersed, leaving an endless stretch of deep blue sky. Today was going to be a fine day.

After using the Locater Stone at the center of the observatory platform to set Kirito's return point, Lyfa spread her wings, gently shaking the four pieces.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Kirito, as well as Yui in the pocket, nodded confirmation, and Lyfa was just about to take off when...

"Lyfa-chan!"

She was called to a stop by a person who had rolled out of the elevator, and Lyfa let the foot that had started to float settle back onto the platform.

"Oh, Recon."

"That's so mean... you could have at least let me know before you left!"

"Sorry, I forgot."

Recon's shoulders drooped, but he took up a face with a serious expression and said:

"Lyfa-chan, is it true that you left the team?"

"It is... but about half of that decision was made in the heat of the moment. What about you?"

"I've decided; I want to pledge my sword to Lyfa-chan."

"No, I don't really need it."

Recon stumbled at Lyfa's words, his wings drooping, but he did not give up because of something like that.

"Originally, I would have said that we should just go together, but I have some things to do."

"What...?"

"There is no positive proof, so I want to investigate more. I will stay in Sigurd's party for now... Kirito-san."

Recon turned to Kirito with a serious expression on his face.

"She has a habit of jumping into trouble, so please be careful."

"Oh, I see."

Kirito seemed to be amused by Recon's expression, and he nodded his head.

"Also, I want to tell you that she is my— Ack!!"

The last words were from a scream caused by Lyfa stomping on Recon's foot.

"Do not say anything unnecessary! I think I will stay in the neutral zone for some time, but if anything comes up, e-mail me!"

Lyfa said quickly, before she spread her wings and rose gently into the air. Looking toward Recon's exposed face with some regret, Lyfa waved goodbye with her right hand.

"... Even without me, practice voluntary flight until you can do it perfectly, and don't go too close to Salamander territory! Bye!"

"Take care Lyfa! I will catch up soon!"

The avatar cried that out despite the fact that the person inside would meet Lyfa soon in school anyway; still, the strong feelings of that parting overwhelmed her with emotions, and she became flustered and suddenly changed her direction. She gazed northeast before resetting her wings to a wider angle and began gliding.

Kirito soon caught up with her, and, as he fought back a smile, said:

"Is he a friend from the real world?"

"Well, yeah."

"Mmm."

"...What was that?"

"Nothing; I just think it's nice."

After what Kirito said, the pixie hiding in his chest pocket also said.

"I am very aware of that person's feelings: he likes Lyfa. Lyfa, how do you see him?"

"I don't know!!"

Lyfa cried out loudly, increasing her speed to hide her blushing face. Although she has become accustomed to these kinds of straightforward expressions from Recon, for some reason, when in front of Kirito, she became very shy.

Recovering only to find they had already left the city and were flying above the forest. Lyfa turned around to watch the city of emerald disappear as she flew backwards.

At the thought of leaving Sylvain after having lived over a year on its streets, a feeling of nostalgia entered her heart and a pain entered her chest, but the thrill of flying into an unknown world eased the pain. Bye-bye, Lyfa said to herself before turning to face forward.

"..Let's go! I want to reach that lake in one flight!"

Lyfa pointed to the lake that sparkled in the distance, speeding up her wings.

* * *

The cold touch of his fingers sent shivers up her arms, Asuna endured.

At the center of the birdcage rested a huge bed. Oberon lay flat on the bed with his loose green toga, he took Asuna's left hand and caressed her skin as she sat beside him facing away. He enjoyed the situation where he could attack her whenever he felt like it. His perfectly created face has a fake smile stuck on it.

Just a little while ago, Oberon entered the cage and laid on the bed, he had told her to come beside him. Asuna wanted nothing to do with the man and declined, but seeing his hand manipulating something, she sensed danger heading to her.

She still fought back her disgust and obeyed; the man has severe mood swings, but she was afraid she would be deprived of even more freedom. However, Oberon was looking forward to Asuna's resistance. He wanted to savour Asuna's aversion to him, before his use of the system administrator's rights to restrict her movement. Asuna wanted to maintain her freedom within the cage at least. So that escape from there was a possibility.

But there was a limit. If he touched her body, Asuna would probably jam her right fist into his face. But Asuna didn't react; no matter how much he stroked her arm, her body was like a stone. Seeing that, Oberon was disappointed that he couldn't make her squirm, and removed his hand.

"Oh well, you're a stubborn woman too."

Oberon disdainfully said. Asuna was offended by his mere voice, as it was a perfect replica of Sugou`s so this was yet another source of dislike.

"Anyway, this body is fake. Nothing I do will leave any scars. Being in such a place all day, aren't you bored? Hey, don't you want to have a little fun?"

"You don't seem to understand. It doesn't matter if this body is flesh and blood, or virtual; it is real, at least for me."

"Do you want to say that the mind will become dirty?"

Oberon`s cuckoo-like laugh came from his throat.

"Anyway, until I've secured my position in RECTO, I will not let you out. So I think you should be wise to learn to like it. This system is actually very profound, do you understand?"

"I'm not interested. And I will not stay here forever... he will definitely come to help."

"Eh? Who? Him? The hero, Kirito?"

Hearing his name, Asuna`s body trembled a bit. Oberon laughed and sat up. It seems that he finally found the switch to break Asuna`s heart... and he started babbling.

"His real name is Kirigaya Kazuto, right? I met him, face-to-face a few days ago."

"!!"

After hearing this, Asuna looked at Oberon.

"Oh, the emaciated child actually is the Hero of SAO... ah, to be honest, I cannot believe it! Or is it that he is that kind of person, a so-called game fanatic?"

Oberon was overjoyed, and sat up as he continued on.

"I met him... and can you guess where? He was in your ward, where your real body was. As he sat in front of the sleeping you, I told him I was going to marry you this week. His face when I said that was a masterpiece!! Like a dog without a bone, that expression of hopelessness could not be reconciled. I felt like having a good laugh!!"

Oberon's body shook as his strange laugh splintered the air.

"So you really believe that guy would come and save you? We can make a bet, I don't think that guy would have even the courage to once again pick

up the Nerve Gear! The chances of him even knowing you are in this game are slim. Oh, yes, I will give him a wedding invitation. He will come to see what you look like wearing a wedding dress. I think that this level of conflict would lead to his destruction. To the hero!"

Asuna bowed her head again, slowly turning her back on Oberon, looking at the big mirror beside the bed. Then she feebly dropped her shoulders, her hands tightly clutching the mattress.

Seeing Asuna this way, Oberon was very satisfied. Asuna watched in the mirror as he left the bed and stood up.

"At the time, the surveillance cameras were turned off, so it was a pity being unable to take a picture of his expression. I would have brought it if I had a picture. If there is a chance, I will try it next time. It is a separation of necessity, Titania, and even if it is a bit lonely, endure it until the day after tomorrow."

After a final laugh, Oberon turned around, and with his toga swinging, walked toward the door.

In the mirror, Oberon slowly faded away, but Asuna wept tears of joy and cheered in her heart.

Kirito-kun! Kirito-kun is still alive and well!

Since being imprisoned here, that was Asuna's greatest concern. Only she had been transferred to this world, that he had disappeared and his consciousness had been destroyed. No matter how much she denied it, these thoughts had been a poison constantly dripping in her mind.

Now, however, Oberon`s speech dispelled this concern.

Really, that guy thinks he is so smart, but in fact, he is a fool. It has always been that way. He can't seem to stop belittling others with speech. Although he often played the hypocrite in front of Asuna's parents, in front of Asuna and her older brother, Sugou's poisonous tongue against others was always used.

The same is true now. If he had truly wanted to break her heart, he shouldn't have told her about Kirito in the real world. He should have told her that Kirito had died.

Kirito is still alive and doing well in the real world.

Asuna repeated this one sentence in her mind. Each time she repeats this, the light in her heart became stronger and more stable.

If he is alive, he would not just sit around. He will find this world, he will certainly come. Therefore, she should not just be a prisoner. She must find out what she could do and act decisively.

Asuna continued to put on a sad face. Through the mirror, she could see that Oberon had reached the door and had turned around to glance at her, to confirm Asuna's situation.

The door had a small metal plate with twelve buttons arranged side by side. Just entering the numbers in the correct order would open the door.

It was a wonder how he could still do this kind of troublesome thing instead of just using his administrator's privileges to directly open the door. Apparently, Oberon has his own sense of aesthetics, he doesn't want to bring system related things here. He just wanted to be a fairy king, with an imprisoned fairy queen to abuse.

It was a stupid performance.

Oberon raised his hand, operating in front of the metal plate. From where he was standing, Asuna could not clearly see the details of his action due to system distance effect, so that when he does press a button, she will not know which. Oberon must have also taken this into account, that a cell with such a lock is safe.

This is true, for a direct view of Oberon.

Oberon used Nerve Gear to connect to the virtual world, but his time in the virtual world is limited. Therefore, there are a lot of things that he does not understand. For example, in the virtual world, mirrors do not comply with optics.

Asuna pretends to cry, straining her eyes in the mirror from close range. There, clearly reflected, is Oberon, an image with a clarity far too high. In the real world, no matter how close your eyes are to the mirror you can't see far away objects. Here the mirror is just a ultra-high resolution screen and the distance effect doesn't apply. Thus, even the activities of Oberon's fingers are clearly visible.

This was an idea Asuna had thought of long ago. However, when Oberon left the prison, she didn't have a chance to be close to the mirror. Right now, Asuna was able to take advantage of this opportunity.

... 8... 11... 3... 2... 9.....

Asuna watched closely as Oberon`s white fingers pressed the code, and Asuna quickly took it to heart. The door opened, Oberon went out, and the door crashed shut. With his jade-colored fairy wings rocking, he moved along the road in the tree, eventually disappearing.

Asuna stayed in place, staring at the checkered floor of the cage.

She has only obtained the following information so far:

This is inside a type of VRMMO, similar to SAO, called «ALfheim Online» and the game is operated officially to attract a large number of players. Oberon / Sugou used the ALO server to take some of the SAO players, about three hundred people, hostage through «Brain Imprisonment» for use as subjects in illegal human experimentation. That is all.

When asked as to why he initiated such dangerous and illegal experimentation in a public game, Sugou whiningly said, "Do you know how much money it takes to run this system? It took ten million just for this one server! This way the company can have profits, and I can do my research, two birds with one stone."

So it's about money, which is good for Asuna. If it was a fully enclosed environment, there was nothing she could do. Since this world is closely linked to the real world, then there is hope.

The day in-game flies faster than in the real world, Asuna once heard Oberon say. That exact calculation was difficult, but Oberon solved it for her without meaning to.

He often visited every other day. When his business was completed, he would use a terminal system within the company to get here. Asuna knew that he has a tendency to stick to the life cycle he finds so familiar, so she didn't think his schedule ever changes. Thus, the best time to do something would be after he goes home to sleep.

Of course, there are more people associated with this plot than just him. However, this is by nature a crime, so it is hard to imagine that all the companies associated with ALO are mixed up in it. They might just be a

few people, all of whom are probably directly under Sugou's command. Even so, it would not be possible to monitor the interior of ALO full time because there is no one in the working class willing to work all night.

To escape from this cage, it would be necessary to somehow slip past their eyes and find the terminal located somewhere in the system. Once I have access, it would be possible to log out, if not I can try to send a message out. Asuna laid on the bed, placed her face in the pillow, and waited for time to pass.

Chapter 4

Watching Kirito fight, Lyfa was half-awed and half-stunned.

They were in the skies over the expanse of Ancient Forest in northeastern Sylph territory; a little further and they would pass into the vicinity of the plateau. Sylvain was already so far behind them that no matter how much you strained your eyes, the jade tower could not be seen.

They were pushing through the depths of the so-called neutral zone, so the spawned monsters were powerful and considerably high-leveled. Kirito was currently fighting three one-eyed winged-lizard monsters, «Evil Glancer», simultaneously. Their strength was about equal to the boss monsters of lower level dungeons in Sylph territory.

Besides their basic strength, the real trouble was that their big, purple eyes could release the «Evil Eye» attack – a type of curse magic that would significantly reduce one's stats for a period of time when it hit. Lyfa was maintaining her distance and acting as a support role. Whenever a curse hit Kirito, Lyfa would incant the counter spell, but honestly whether or not the need existed was up in the air.

To Kirito who gripped the greatsword reaching near his height, the words defense and evasion did not exist in his dictionary; and as if to display this berserk style, the lizards were dropped one after another. He simply didn't care about the likes of the lizards' tails' long-distance attacks; as he swung the greatsword while charging, many lizards would be caught in the gale at once, getting hewed into little pieces. With the terrible might of the blows, what was at first five lizards had diminished to one just like that. The last one tried to run away at around 20% HP. It let out a pitiable scream as it sought to take refuge in the forest, but Lyfa raised her left hand, activating a long range homing-type vacuum magic. Four or five boomerang-like blades made of green light quickly caught up to the lizard and cut it to shreds. Shortly afterward, the blue reptile's large body scattered into blue polygons of light, signalling the quick end of the fifth fight of the day.

A large metallic sound accompanied the sheathing of the sword, Lyfa raised her right hand as she saw Kirito lightly approaching in the air.

"Good work—"

"Thanks for the cover—"

Their hands met in a high-five, and the two exchanged smiles.

"But how should I describe it... your combat style is just so reckless."

Hearing Lyfa say that, Kirito scratched his head.

"I-Is that so?"

"Generally, it is a good idea to use hit and run tactics for evasion, but you just hit and hit!"

"In return we can finish faster, so isn't it fine?"

"That might work in situations with similar monsters like today, but not if you run into a group of monsters with a combination of melee and long-range types, for example. If we end up fighting a player party they will definitely use magic so you have to be careful."

"Magic—? Can't I just avoid it?"

"There are many types of long-range magic; for power-type magic that go straight, you can read its direction to avoid it, but for homing and area attack magic that's impossible. In the case that there is a mage that uses these types of magic, you have to always maintain a high speed and time your direction changes."

"Hmmm.... Seems like there is a lot to remember."

Kirito scratched his head with a face like that of a child given a difficult set of problems to solve.

"Well, if it's you then you should be able to catch on quickly...I think. You seem to have very good intuition and sharp eyes after all. Do you do sports or something in real life?"

"N-no, not at all."

"Hmm.... Well, okay. Let's get moving."

"Okay."

They nodded to each other, then started beating their wings and resumed movement. Under the setting sun, the golden-green grasslands were beginning to emerge beyond the forest.

Without encountering any monsters after that, the two finally got out of Ancient Forest and entered the mountain area. Just as they neared the

limit of their flight time, they descended onto a meadow's edge at the foot of a mountain.

As her soles slid on the grass while landing, Lyfa lifted both of her arms and took a big stretch. Even though the real body doesn't have such limbs, the base of the wings feels mysteriously fatigued after long flights. A few seconds later, Kirito also landed and was similarly hitting his straightened back.

"Fufu, tired yet?"

"Nope, still not yet!"

"Okay, let's do our best. ...Is what I want to say, but we're going to have to postpone the aerial travel for a while."

Kirito raised his eyebrows at Lyfa's remark.

"Eh, why?"

"Do you see that mountain?"

Lyfa pointed to the far end of the meadow, towards the towering, snow-peaked mountains.

"Flying is restricted by a height limit. We cannot fly higher than that mountain, so we have to pass through a cave tunneled through the mountain range. That seems to be the most dangerous place when traveling from Sylph territory to Aarun. I'm not sure because this is my first time here too."

"I see.... This tunnel, is it long?"

"Considerably, but there is a neutral mining town in the middle, and we should be able to rest there. Kirito-kun, until what time are you still okay?"

Kirito summoned the menu window with his left hand, checked the clock, and nodded.

"The real time right now is seven-o'-clock at night, I'm fine for now."

"I see, then let's try for a bit longer then. We should 'Rotate Out' once here."

"Ro-Rotate?"

"Ah, we take turns to logout and rest. Because this is a neutral zone, we can not logout instantly. Therefore, one person will logout while the other defends the avatar when it falls into the soulless state."

"I see, understood. Lyfa, please go first."

"Well then, I'll gladly accept your kind offer. I'll be in your care for about 20 minutes!"

Finished, Lyfa brought up the window and pressed the logout button. When she touched the warning message's YES button, the surrounding landscape streamed into a central point and disappeared.

Sitting straight up in bed after waking up, Suguha removed the Amusphere and jumped out of bed. Quietly running down the stairs, Suguha confirmed that the first floor was empty. The magazine's final proofreading day was nearing so Midori had not returned home yet, and Kazuto was probably in his room, so the first floor was silent.

Opening the refrigerator, Suguha took out two bagels, ham, cream cheese, and vegetables one after another. Quickly slicing the round bread in half, she spread a thin layer of mustard, added the ham, inserted the rest, and then transferred the completed bagel sandwich to a plate. After she poured some milk into a small milk pan and put it on the stove, Suguha went to the stairs, and facing the second floor, shouted:

"Onii-chan, do you want something to eat?"

...But there was no answer. He must be asleep, she shrugged her shoulders as she returned to the kitchen. She poured the now-steaming milk into a mug and took it to the living room table with the plate. After all of ninety seconds, she finished her dinner. Placing the dishes into the washing machine, she ran into the bathroom. Even if it was the virtual world, if you did intense fighting, you would sweat due to stress. After a long dive she started to feel sticky if she didn't wash and change clothes.

Suguha took off her clothes and jumped into the shower at supersonic speed, warm water slowly dripping through the shower head.

In fact, if she played VRMMO too much so that it interfered with eating and bathing, or if she ordered takeout, her mother Midori would scold her, so she tried not to join long party events. However, this time she couldn't do so. She would probably travel with Kirito tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow if it went badly. Maybe due to her personality, Suguha couldn't stand long duration parties, when the day changed she would feel uncomfortable, but for some mysterious reason it didn't happen this time. In this case...

...She was very excited.

Suguha thought as she closed her eyes and felt the soothing touch of the hot water on her skin.

Opening her eyes, her black pupils stared back from within the mirror before her. Within them, there was a mix of excitement and slight unease.

The physique of the real Suguha was by no means big for a kendo practitioner, even so when compared to the wind spirit Sylph, Lyfa, she was obviously big-boned. Her shoulders, stomach and her thighs, whenever she moved them, the line of the muscles seemed to stand out, on top of that she felt that her chest had grown alot recently.

This body has a real feel to it, but deep in my heart there is conflict growing. Suguha closed her eyes again.

...It did not particularly mean that she had become fond of him. It was not about having someone to adventure together... just that, flying in a new world was fun.

That seemed to be muttered in her heart, but that wasn't for the sake of convincing herself, there was truth in it.

Thinking back, she had such a feeling everyday in the past.

As she grew stronger, little by little her field of activities expanded; just flying in the sky of an unknown land made her heart throb. However, as she was raised to the role of a prominent senior player within the Sylph territory, her knowledge and obligations simultaneously increased too. Before she knew it, she was buried within the habits of everyday life. The

said duty of battling for the sake of the entire race was holding her wings with invisible chains.

Players in ALO who abandoned their territory were called «Renegades», the English meaning of «Apostates». Those who discarded their obligation after obtaining them, those who are under pressure by their country, until now gave the impression that they are traitors, might have some kind of pride in their heart.

With her mind still thinking about them, she washed her hair and body quickly then rinsed away the foam. Removing the dry towel from the hatch on the wall, she used the control panel next to it, and a burst of warm air blew out from the slits in the ceiling. When her hair was mostly dry, she wrapped her body with a towel and went to the living room. Looking at the clock, there were less than three minutes before the agreed time limit.

She wrapped up the remaining bagel-sandwich on the plate, took some paper and wrote, "Onii-chan, if you are hungry please eat this," on it, and placed it under the plate.

Back on the second floor, she hastily put on her pajamas, laid back down, and put the Amusphere helmet back on.

After waiting through the connection process, through the rainbow colors of the login procedures, Suguha / Lyfa felt the prairie breeze and smelled a refreshing aroma.

From her waiting state, crouching down on one knee, Lyfa stood up and asked.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, did any monsters appear?"

Kirito, who was lying on the grass with a straw like thing in his mouth, removed it and nodded.

"Welcome back. It was very quiet."

"What is that?"

"The NPC from the grocery store said that it was a Sylvain specialty."

"I did not hear of such a thing!"

Kirito handed over that something and Lyfa accepted it with her hand. She concealed her inner tension and took a bite. With a breath, the mint's fragrant sweet aroma emanated from her mouth.

"It's my turn to logout, please guard me."

"Ok, have a good trip."

When Kirito called up the menu window and pressed the log-out button, his body automatically went into a standby position. Lyfa then sat down beside him and started looking casually up at the heavens while sucking a mint straw when the pixie from Kirito`s breast pocket flew out and surprised her.

"Whoa! You can move when your master is not in-game?"

Yui made an 'of course' face and put her hands on her hips and nodded.

"Of course I can. I'm myself. And he's not my master; he's my papa."

"Having said that, why do you call Kirito your papa? Could it be that he set you up that way?"

"Papa helped me, but he also said that I am his child. So he's my papa."

"I see..."

Sure enough, she did not understand it.

"You love your papa?"

Lyfa casually asked, and Yui looked at her with a serious face.

"Lyfa, what is love?"

"W-what...."

Lyfa was unprepared for the unexpected question and considered it for a moment before only vaguely answering.

"....It's a feeling of wanting to be together. And when you are together, your heart beats faster, or something like that...."

Kazuto`s smiling face suddenly popped into her mind, but why was it the same with the resting face of the avatar beside her? Lyfa gasped. Not sure since when her feelings for Kirito became similar to her hidden feelings for Kazuto. Lyfa shook her head without thinking. Yui saw her do this and cocked her head, asking:

"What's wrong, Lyfa?"

"No, no, no, it is nothing!"

Lyfa shouted, and at that moment—

"What's nothing?"

"Waah!!"

Kirito had suddenly raised his head and Lyfa jumped.

"I'm back. What happened?"

Kirito looked at the distressed Lyfa and stood up. Perched on his shoulder, Yui said:

"Welcome back, papa. We were just talking about who she likes and—,"

"Hey, we were not!!"

Lyfa hurriedly interrupted Yui.

"You came back quickly. Did you eat something?"

Lyfa asked to hide her embarrassment.

"Ah yes, my family made something for me."

"I see, well then, let's quickly depart. If we don't arrive at the Mine City before it gets late, it'll be troublesome to log-out. Come on, let's fly to the cave entrance!"

Lyfa quickly finished talking and stood up. Even though Kirito and Yui did not quite understand what was going on, she didn't wait for them to figure it out and gently began beating her wings.

"Ah, yes. Then let`s go."

Still not understanding the reason for Lyfa's expression, he also spread his wings. But suddenly, he turned and looked in the direction of the forest they came from.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing..."

Kirito replied, though he still stared towards the forest.

"It feels like someone watching. Yui, can you tell if there are any other players in our general area?"

"No, there is no one around us."

The pixie shook her little head. But Kirito didn't look like he is convinced.

"Felt like being watched... is there some sort of a sixth sense in this game?"

Hearing Lyfa ask that, Kirito rubbed his forehead with his right hand and said:

"It is really hard to do that. If anyone is looking at us, the system would have to «Reference» us, you might just feel the data stream used to do so, or so people say."

"Is that so?"

"But Yui does not sense any people nearby so there shouldn't be."

"Ah, then they may have used a Tracer."

Lyfa whispered to Kirito, who raised his eyebrows.

"What is that?"

"It's a tracking spell. Usually a small magic creature that tells the caster the position of the target."

"That's a pretty convenient spell. Can you lift the spell off of us?"

"If I can see the Tracer then I can lift it, but if the caster's magic skills are high, the distance he can observe from increases, so finding it in a field like this is almost impossible."

"I see. It might be just my imagination, anyway let's hurry and go."

"Ok."

After nodding, they flew up into the sky again. The white cliffs of the mountain range were not far away, and in the middle of the cliff was a huge black cave. Aiming for the cave opening that had sinister cold air coming out of it, Lyfa flapped her wings faster and sped up.

After a few minutes of flying, the two reached the cave entrance.

Almost perpendicular to the huge rocks, the cave was a giant square shape that cut into the cliff face. It's width and height was three or four times bigger then Lyfa. They could not tell when they were far away, but carved around the entrance of the cave were some monster designs. The upper part of the hole had a huge devil's head sticking out, looking with contempt into the eyes of all intruders.

"This cave... does it have a name?"

To Kirito's question, Lyfa nodded her head and replied:

"It is called «Ruger Corridor». Ruger happens to be the name of the Mine City."

"Whoa, it's like a story I've seen in a fantasy movie!"

Lyfa looked at Kirito in her peripheral vision and saw him smile. He probably meant those classic fantasy books, from which the films were produced. In Kazuto's room, there was a box with such Collectors' Edition books, she had borrowed them all without permission to read.

"I know what you are talking about. To cross a mountain, they went through the underground mines, and got attacked by a big demon. But, unfortunately demon-type monsters do not appear here."

"That is really too bad."

"Ah, but the cave is infested by orcs. If you find it interesting, you can then deal with the whole horde."

Finished, the two began to move forward into the cave.

It was very cool inside the cave, the light from outside was also very thin, slowly enveloping everything in darkness. It's best to use magic lighting; she thought and turned to Kirito walking beside her.

"Oh yes, Kirito-kun did you train your magic skills?"

"Ah, just the race starting magic, but I didn't use it often."

"Exploring caves is a Spriggan speciality with the use of the lights, it is even more effective than a wind mage's magic."

"Hmm, Yui, do you know?"

Kirito scratched his head and Yui came out of his pocket and said in a lecture voice:

"Papa, I'd really advise that you at least read the instruction manual. Using light magic is...."

Yui slowly said the incantation, and Kirito raised his right hand and repeated the words. His right hand sent a wave of gray light, and it continued to spread. When it covered Lyfa, she was able to see in a wide area around them. The light did not appear to be a light source; instead, the spell gave the user night-vision.

"Wow, this is really convenient. Spriggans might actually be of some use."

"Ah, hearing you say that makes me feel hurt."

"Ha ha ha. But seriously, you should at least memorize some useful magic incantations. If you can't even use Spriggans' speciality spells in a life and death situation, it would be a shame."

"Woo, those words hurt even more."

While talking lightly, they continued to move further inside the cave's many twists and turns. Soon, they couldn't see the white light from the entrance anymore.

"I think it was 'ARLU-DENA-RERE..'"

Kirito looked at the shiny purple Reference Manual and tried to whisper unfamiliar spell incantations.

"No, no, reading it like this won't activate the spell. The incantation is not just mechanical recitation, you must understand each «Word of Power» and associate it with the effect of magic while memorizing it."

Hearing this remark, the black swordsman sighed deeply and dropped his head.

"I did not think that I would be learning words that look like English in a game."

"I'll warn you, the high level spells have at least twenty words."

"Aw come on, I'll just be a pure fighter..."

"Crying is useless!! Quickly start over again."

In the about two hours they travelled after entering the cave, they fought with orcs over ten times and won without any problems. Thanks to the map purchased in Sylvain, they went in a straight line and travelled fast. According to the map, there should be a huge underground lake ahead, crossing the bridge over it should lead to the mining city, Ruger.

Ruger was not as big as the Gnome underground capital city, but it held facilities that produced high quality ore and a lot of businessmen and blacksmith players lived there. They didn't meet any other players on the way. This cave wasn't a very good hunting place, and above all, as Sylphs' forte is flight, many would tend to avoid places where they couldn't fly. The cave was plenty large, but as neither sunlight nor moonlight, the sources of flight endurance, reach this area, the wings are not able to recover.

Sylph players who wanted to go to Aarun for trade and tourism usually took the longer route from the northern part of Sylvain, passing into Cait Sith territory near the mountains. Living there are the Cait Sith race with their cat ears and tail. They could use the skill «Taming» by feeding monsters and animals, and had always provided tamed riding animals to the Sylph capital in friendship, so they had been on good terms for a long while. The relationship between the lords of the two races was also very good, it was said that they would soon form a covenant.

Since Lyfa had a few close Cait Sith friends, she had intended to choose the route through the northern pass, but went through the mountains because Kirito looked to be in a hurry. Truthfully, going through underground depths made Lyfa uncomfortable, but in the present situation going through the mountains certainly did not present a problem.

Anyway, the reason why Kirito was in so much of a hurry to get to Aarun, and the World Tree, was still a mystery to her. His attitude made her wonder at the uncertainty of his heart, but his fighting posture seemed very anxious.

She remembered Kirito mention he was looking for someone. People who lost contact in the real world and came looking in game was not too uncommon. On the bulletin board in front of the grocery store, in the asking people corner, the 'Looking for someone' was never ending. Usually it was for revenge or love interest, but neither seemed to fit Kirito. And, searching in Aarun was understandable, but why the world tree? Right now that was

like an unreachable area, even if we could reach the bottom, going to the top was almost impossible.

Lyfa walked beside Kirito who was continuing the hard fight with Spellwords, and lost herself in thought. Usually not paying attention in the neutral zone was equivalent to suicide, but on this trip due to Yui's fearsome senses, she would warn them of approaching monsters so there was no need to worry about ambushes.

Then, after a few more minutes, they were about to reach the underground lake when Lyfa heard a sound, it was not Yui's warning, it was very close to the ringing of a phone.

Lyfa raised her head, turned to Kirito, and said:

"Ah, I'm getting a message. I'm sorry, please wait a moment."

"Ok."

Lyfa stopped, near the front of her body below her chest, she pressed the icon shown. A window popped up showing receive of a Friend Message. Lyfa's friend list only had one name , Recon, this was not out of intention, so even before reading it she knew who it was from. It was probably irrelevant content, she thought while glancing at it. But—

'It is what I expected! Be careful, S'

That was the only thing written.

"What the heck is this?"

She said without thinking. It didn't make any sense. What was expected? Be careful of what? And what was the 'S' at the end? Even if he signed the message, wouldn't it be with an 'R', wasn't there some kind of hidden meaning?

"Esu...sa...shi...su....hmm."

"What was it?"

Lyfa explained it to the puzzled Kirito. Then, Yui stuck her head out of his pocket and said:

"Papa, I'm detecting a response in close proximity."

"Monsters?"

Kirito`s hand clutched his sword hilt, but Yui shook her head.

"No – players, a lot, twelve of them."

"Twelve!?"

Lyfa became speechless. For a group of players forming a combat party, that was just too many. Maybe it was a group of Sylph going from Sylvain to Ruger, or even to Aarun as a trade caravan.

Indeed, once a month there was usually a large party gathering in the Sylph capital for a trip to and from the central area. Usually a few days ahead of departure, they would tell all the players to recruit participants, but this morning when she had looked at the Bulletin Board there hadn't been anything written about that.

Here was an unknown group, if it were Sylphs then it might not have been dangerous, but the chance of it being a PK group of a different race was not unthinkable. Lyfa had a bad feeling about the whole thing, she turned towards Kirito.

"I have a bad feeling about this. We should hide and let them pass."

"But hide where?"

Kirito was puzzled and looked around. They were in a long wide road, with no side branches to hide in.

"Well, leave that to me."

Lyfa grabbed Kirito's wrist and hid in a nearby hollow area. Suppressing the blush brought on by close physical contact, she raised her left hand for the magic incantation.

Soon a green light radiating from the foot upward, wrapped the two bodies. Vision was slightly green-dyed, but from the outside they would be almost completely hidden. Lyfa looked up at Kirito beside her and whispered:

"Speak quietly, if we're too loud then the magic will be lifted."

"Understood. This magic is really useful."

Kirito watched the area they were hiding, constantly scanning the area. Yui poked her head out and said in a low voice:

"In about two minutes you will see them."

The two of them made themselves smaller and moved close to the cave wall. After some tense seconds, Lyfa heard the sound of footsteps coming. Mixed in with the footsteps was the sound of heavy armour clanking, which made her think and look.

Kirito craned his neck, staring at the direction of the unknown group.

"What is that?"

"What? I do not see anyone."

"I don't see any players, but maybe monsters? A small, red bat."

"!?"

Lyfa held her breath looking at the front. In the darkness of the cave, there was a little red shape flying their way. This was—

"Damn."

Lyfa subconsciously cursed out loud, and jumped from lying low on the ground out to the middle of the road. The Concealment Magic lifted at the same time and Kirito stood up as well bewildered.

"Hey, hey, what happened?"

"That is high level magic Tracer Searcher!! We must destroy it quickly!!"

While crying out, Lyfa stretched out her hands and began chanting a spell. After a lengthy incantation, her fingertips released numerous shining emerald needles. Viiii, sounded in the air as the needles head to kill the red shape.

The bat floated in the air slowly, and tried to dodge the attacks, but since there were so many needles, it soon got pierced with many. It fell to the ground, wrapped by a red flame, and disappeared. Confirmed hit, Lyfa turned towards Kirito and shouted:

"Run toward the city, Kirito-kun!!"

"Oh, no more hiding?"

"The enemy will know when their tracer was destroyed. They will probably send out a lot of searchers, so it will be almost impossible to hide. That magic pet had fire properties. This means the approaching party is..."

"Salamanders!"

Kirito frowned after showing off his knowledge. While they were talking, the rattle-rattle sound of metal mixed with footsteps came closer. Lyfa turned and saw in the distance a dark red light.

"Let's go."

Nodding, the two began to run.

As they checked the map while rushing onwards, this straight road will soon end, and in front is a huge underground lake. The way to pass the lake is a bridge, at the other end is the entrance to the mining city, Ruger. It is a neutral city so no attack is allowed inside, no matter how many people they have, they won't be able to do anything.

But why is a big group of Salamanders here?

Lyfa bit her lip. Using a tracer means they were hunting us from the beginning. After departing Sylvain, because of Yui's search power, there shouldn't be a chance for them to cast it. The only possibility is that they used the magic while we were in the streets of Sylvain.

The number of Sylph who can use fire magic is not zero. Each race has an attribute of magic talent, the wind for Sylph, earth for Gnome, etc., and other attributes of the spell can be learned through hard practice and increasing skills.

However, the red bat they killed can follow and track the target, and search for hidden targets, is a very high level magic that requires a fire magic skill almost impossible for another race than Salamander to obtain. In other words—

'There was a Salamander in Sylvain?'

Lyfa thought while running. If this is true, it's not easily done. Although Sylvain is open to travelers of other races, due to the hostile relations with the Salamanders, their entry is very strict and checked. If the strong NPC guardians find a Salamander, they will immediately attack. Getting past that isn't too easy.

"Oh, the lake!"

Running to the right in front of her, Kirito`s voice interrupted Lyfa`s thoughts. She raised her head and saw the rugged mountain road

changing into flat stone ahead, the space becoming very open, the dark green lake water shining with a faint light.

A stone bridge spans the middle of the lake, on the other side is a huge gate reaching to the roof. It is the mining city, Ruger's door. Once beyond that door, it's our victory in this game of hide and seek.

This gave Lyfa some peace of mind and she took a look over her shoulder. From behind, the red light was still some distance away. Since this is the case— the two ran at full speed up the stone trail.

When they got on the bridge, the surrounding temperature dropped a lot. They cut through the water scented air, speeding on the bridge.

"Looks like we escaped."

"Don't drop your guard. There is a large monster in the water."

While talking with Kirito, they arrived at the center of the bridge which was a round observation area, and in that instant.

Passing over their head in the darkness, from behind came two points of high-speed light. Its special light and sound effect showed that it is magical. It must be from the Salamanders chasing them, but its accuracy is very bad.

Since it will hit in front of them, they just need to slow down. After slowing, the light landed about ten meters in front.

It exploded as expected, Lyfa raised her right hand to cover her face, but what happened next was completely unexpected. Humming! A huge rock wall rose up from the bridge and blocked up the entire path. Lyfa frowned at the unexpected problem and swore:

"This is bad..."

"What?"

Kirito`s eyes got wide, but kept running forward and drew his sword to slash the wall.

"Ah, Kirito-kun!"

'It's useless,' didn't have time to exit her mouth. Kirito's sword hit the stone wall, Goun! A loud noise came from the contact and the rebound force

made him sit on the bridge. The brown stone wall didn't have a single scratch on it.

"...It's no use."

Lyfa flew over to Kirito's side and stopped, saying it. The Spriggan youth stood up with a reproachful look.

"You should have said that earlier."

"You are too reckless. This is an earth magic barrier, physical attacks can't damage it. Only a lot of magic attacks can destroy it..."

"We don't have the time for that..."

They turned together, the group garbed in armor, gleaming with the color of blood, was approaching the front of the bridge.

"Flying around it... won't be possible, huh. How about diving into the lake?"

Shaking her head at Kirito's proposal.

"Not possible. I said it earlier, there seems to be a very high level water dragon monster living in the lake. Without an Undine's help, fighting in the water would be suicidal."

"So, there's no choice but to fight, right?"

Turning to Kirito who held his sword in a graceful posture, Lyfa bit her lip and nodded.

"We have no choice... but this might be bad... For Salamanders to use such high level earth magic, there must be a rather skilful mage in that group."

The bridge is not wide, so the worst condition of being surrounded can be avoided. Even with this, twelve against two are really long odds, and flight is not possible within this dungeon. Lyfa's excellence in aerial dogfights can't be used.

It all depends on the enemies' combat effectiveness.

...But we cannot hope for too much on that.

Murmuring that in her heart, Lyfa stood beside Kirito and drew her katana. With the sound of heavy metal, the approaching enemy can easily be

seen. In the front are three big Salamanders, dressed in armor heavier than the Salamanders she fought yesterday, left hand holding a mace or another single-handed weapon, and right hand equipped with a huge metal shield.

Seeing this, Lyfa was momentarily lost in thought. Within ALO the dominant hand is the same as in the real world, so left-handed players should be relatively few.

Before Lyfa can voice this doubt, Kirito looked at her and said:

"Don`t take this the wrong way, but can you be my support?"

"Eh?"

"I hope that you can heal me from behind. This way I can fight without care."

Lyfa looked at Kirito's huge double-edged sword. Indeed on this narrow bridge, friendly fire would be possible and avoiding that would be hard. Healing is not her speciality, but she nodded her head and retreated to just before the rock wall. There was no time for argument.

Kirito bent down and drew his sword from behind. He sent waves of pressure toward the three Salamanders. Kirito's body is not too big, so he barely made a sound moving forward. His eyes shone with the accumulation of energy. The distance between the two sides shortened as she watched—

"—Ha!!"

In one breath, Kirito's left foot stepped forward, blue special effect lights appeared as he slashed his sword horizontally at the dark red heavy soldiers. With the loud sound of air being cut, the bridge shook; it was the most powerful slash that Lyfa had ever seen. But—

"Eh!?"

Lyfa eyes wide open in surprise. The three Salamanders pulled their weapons back, and brought their shields forward, hiding their bodies behind the wall of shields.

GANG! ! Loud roar, Kirito's sword hit the Tower Shields in a row leaving a horizontal scar. The air vibrated and a big wave spread out on the lake. But those heavy fighters were only pushed back, blocking Kirito's attack.

Lyfa hurriedly studied their HP. Probably more than ten percent reduction, but that was only for a moment, as the next instant chants rang out behind them, and pale blue light covered the three front defenders. In reply to the healing incantations, their HP refilled completely. Then, in the back...

From behind the castle wall-like defense of steel, many red-orange fireballs shot out, followed a parabolic path through the air, and exploded at Kirito's position.

Explosions powerful enough to make the lake surface reflect red covered the black-clad boy.

"Kirito-kun!!"

Lyfa shouted loudly, almost in despair. Kirito's HP bar rapidly declined, instantly moving into the yellow warning area. No, in ALO's fully skill-based system, HP increases very slowly, so it's a miracle he didn't die instantly. These are intensive multiple magic attacks. Lyfa immediately realized the other's intent to kill.

This enemy group certainly knows about Kirito and his physical attack power, so they used these counter measures.

Three heavily armored defenders would tank Kirito's attacks, using heavy shields for defense. No matter how powerful Kirito's attacks are, if he can't hit their body directly, he wouldn't cause fatal damage. The remaining nine people are probably all mages. Some would heal the front line defenders, others used indirect fire magic to attack. This is the formation used for fighting boss monsters with strong physical attacks.

But why would so many people be mobilized to attack Kirito and Lyfa?

Leaving her doubt behind, Lyfa started her healing magic incantation. Finally the flames thinned, and as the Kirito became visible, Lyfa used the highest rank healing spell she had. Soon his HP bar began to fill, but she knew it would not last long.

Kirito was also aware of the enemies' tactics. Since a long fight was unfavorable, he lifted up his sword and stormed toward the heavy solider line.

"Woo oh!"

The black blade hit the shields, and bright sparks flashed.

But— Here, the fighting turned into a numbers game.

The damage done by Kirito's sword was soon healed by the mages behind. After that, the remaining mages chanted attack magic and Kirito was hit by another explosion.

There is no room for individual skills; Lyfa hated this style of fighting the most. Now the battle is determined by the mages' MP and Kirito's HP, which will run out first. But the result was very clear.

Numerous fireballs rained down and blasted Kirito. Continuous explosions hit Kirito and his battered body flipped and bounced onto the ground.

Since this is a game, the body in ALO doesn't show «Pain», but bearing the magical explosions directly can cause some bad feedback. The roar shakes the brain, the heat burns the skin, the impact upsets the balance. These effects will be transferred to reality in the flesh, after signing out these effects will remain for several hours as headaches and dizziness.

"Uuu...oooh!"

But no matter how many times Kirito was engulfed in flames he continued to stand up and swing his sword. While chanting healing magic, Lyfa didn't want to see him in pain. This is a game. In this situation, most would give up. While failure is regrettable, under the system constraints, this is a difference in combat strength you can't do anything about. Even so, why—

Lyfa could no longer bear seeing Kirito like this, so she went a few steps behind Kirito and cried:

"Enough, Kirito-kun! It's just another few hours of flight from Sylvain! What items that were stolen we can just buy back, please give up!"

But Kirito shook his head and said in a hushed tone:

"No!"

His eyes reflected the brilliant red flames surrounding them.

"While I live, I won't let my party member die. I will definitely not allow that!"

Lyfa, at a loss for words, could only stand still.

In such desperate times, different players react in many different ways. There are people who would have laughed at «this moment», there are people whose eyes would open wide and succumb to fear, and there are

also those who would resist to the end. But in any case, they are all used to the simulation of «Death». This experience can not be avoided while playing VRMMO games, and has to be accepted. Otherwise there is no way to «Enjoy» this type of «Game».

But the light in Kirito's glaring eyes is something Lyfa had never seen before. Struggling with this system's impossible situation, desperately trying to find a way to live, she got drawn in. At this moment, Lyfa forgot this is a game, an illusionary world.

"Woo-oh-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah!!"

Kirito who stood up and roared, shook the air with his sound. When enemy fire stopped for a moment, he suddenly rushed forward, ignoring the shield wall ahead. Lowered his sword in his right hand, his empty left hand held the edge of the shield and tried to push it open. This unexpected action disrupted the Salamander's defensive line. When their defensive wall cracked, Kirito forced his sword in.

To break past a defensive wall with mages behind it is something even the veteran player Lyfa had not seen before. Also, that action was not even an attack, so it couldn't deal any damage. But, due to Kirito's crazy action, the man holding the shield cried in confusion:

"Damn, what is with this guy?!"

At this time, a small voice reached Lyfa's ears.

"Now is the only chance!"

Looking around, unknown since when, Yui hung on to her right shoulder.

"An opportunity!?"

"The only uncertainty is the enemy players' mental state. Use up all your remaining MP, please block the next magic attack!"

"B..but, even doing that..."

Like pouring water onto a hot stone, Lyfa held back what she was going to say. She looked seriously at the supposedly simple AI, Yui, and saw determination equal to Kirito's.

Lyfa nodded her head, and held both hands upward. The enemy mage group is already chanting the fireball spell, but in order to match the launch

time, it was at a relatively slow speed. Lyfa chanted the spell words at her usual high speed. Any incantation error will result in failure, she chanted the fastest she could, just shy of the danger line.

Lyfa completed her spell just a bit ahead of them. From her hands came countless small butterflies flying out, surrounding Kirito's body.

After that, the enemies completed their chant as well. With a shrill sound, the group's fireballs shot into the sky. Flame after flame engulfed Kirito, who was trying to break through the shield wall.

"Ha!"

Lyfa's outstretched hands experience the feedback pressure from the explosions, and she clenched her teeth. The defensive magic field around Kirito canceled out the explosions, and her mana points dropped with a clunk clunk sound effect. Not even drinking mana recovery potion can keep up with it. What's the point of defending one such attack, she thought, but then.

Standing on the shoulder of Lyfa, Yui loudly shouted:

"Papa, do it now!!"

Kirito blinked while startled. In the red lotus flames, he raised his sword and stood up. She can hear the subtle sound of chanting. Lyfa matched the spell word fragments to the index in her memory.

'This incantation is... Illusion attribute!?'

Lyfa held her breath for a moment— then ground her teeth. The spell Kirito is casting is an illusion magic that makes a player look like a monster. But the magic is not useful in actual combat. Because the shape depends randomly on the player's combat skills, usually the result is some weak monster, with no change in stats, since most people are aware of this it won't frighten them.

Lyfa began losing MP very fast, soon only 10% was left. She decided to gamble on Yui's idea, but it seems the dice betrayed them.

However, it can't be helped. Knowing the game's «Strength» is needed to support the wealth of knowledge. For Kirito who just started playing a few days ago, asking him to understand each of the huge number of spells is too cruel.

While thinking this, Lyfa put the last of her power into protecting Kirito. the enemy's last wave of attacks finally stopped, just as Lyfa's defense shield disappeared. A whirlpool of flames rolled up, and slowly dissipated—

"Eh!?"

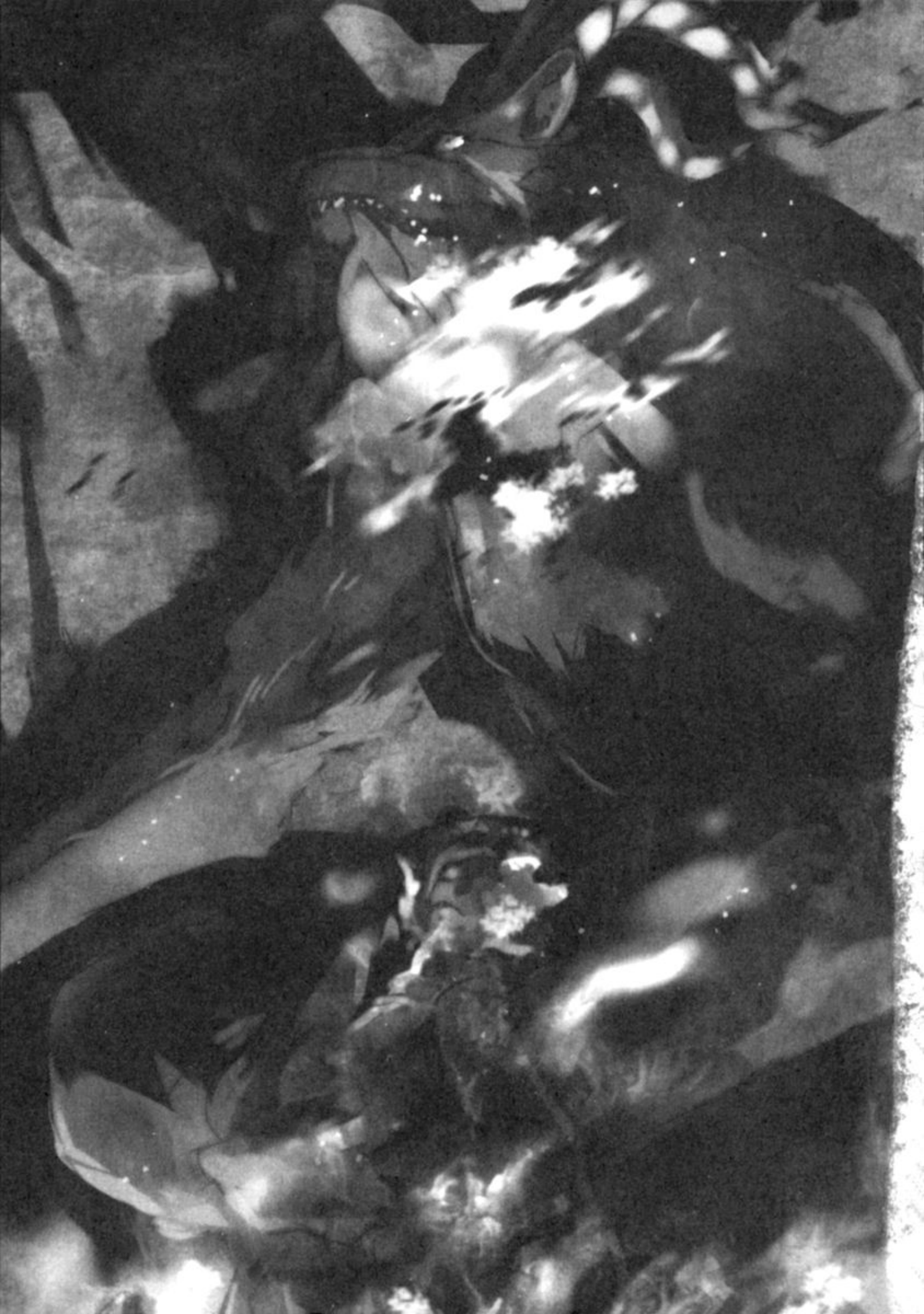
Inside the fire wall, a shadow moved. For a time, Lyfa thought she was seeing things. That is way too huge.

Standing in front of the Salamanders was a giant twice their size. Doubting her sight, it looked like a giant bent over.

"Kirito-kun, is that you?"

She asked in amazement. She can't think it's anything else. This is Kirito's changed form created by the illusion spell, but that huge size.

In front of Lyfa's eyes, the shadow looked up. This figure is not a giant. Its head like a goat, with curved horns extending out the back of the head. Round shiny red eyes flashing, teeth outside his mouth breathed flames in the air.



His upper body is all muscle covered with dark skin, long arms almost reaching the ground. His back has a whip-like tail. To describe the unknown figure in words, only «Devil» fit.

All of the Salamanders were frozen in place. Watching them like their souls were taken away, the black devil lifted his head high.

"Roarrr———!!" A thunderous roar issued, and it truly shook the world. From the core of the body, instinctive fear spread out.

"Prattle! Babbling!"

A Salamander front defender screamed while backing away a few steps. At this instant, the devil moved with a fearsome speed. His iron clawed right hand passed through the open shield wall, his fingers pierced a heavy armored soldier's body— the next moment, red End Frame blowing, the Salamander disappeared.

"Woo ah ah ah!?"

Seeing their partner killed in one blow, the remaining two front defenders screamed in unison. They dropped their shields, their left hands brandishing weapons, and retreated in fear.

From the mage group, someone like their leader shouted in anger:

"Stupid, do not disrupt the formation! He can only reach what he sees, if you become a turtle you won't get hurt!"

However those words did not reach the ears of the soldiers. The dark devil roared and jumped in, it opened its huge mouth and bit the head of the soldier to the right and grabbed the left solider with its iron claws. He violently shook and beat the avatars, gogob! Continuous red death throes splash out, almost the same as blood spatter.

The three front guards were destroyed within ten seconds. Their leader recovered and ordered the mage group, and they began to chant. But without any armor and only wearing red robes, the pure mage group is way too fragile compared to the front guards. With a shruru breath, the standing devil is way more fearsome than the illusion magic effect. Their chanting speed became even slower than before.

Before the chanting could finish, the devil raised his right arm toward the mages and slashed horizontally. The two in front were hit and blown away, they turned into red flames in the air, dissipated and disappeared. Screams

and sound of glass shattering, cracking sound effects filled the air. That was from the tree trunk like left arm hitting two more Salamanders, who disappeared.

A high level mage wearing high quality cloth armor became distracted and messed up certain words in his incantation. The Spellword fumble effect covered his hands and boom, he disappeared in a dark cloud.

Kirito, in his Devil-form, took a step and roared again. The Salamander leader screamed 'Hiii!' and waved his right hand around.

"Withdrawal, withdrawal! Retreat—"

Before he finished the sentence—

The devil instantly squatted, then jump forward significantly. Landing in the middle of the enemy, sending shock waves through the bridge. After what happened, it can not be called fighting anymore.

As the devil's claws swung, End Frame followed its path. A few brave ones tried to fight back with their staves, while swinging their weapons, the devil's teeth bit through their heads, and they lost their lives.

Escaping from the storm, the leader reached the far side of the bridge. With a splash of water he jumped into the lake, and swam in high speed for the far side.

In ALO falling into the water, if the weight of equipment does not exceed a certain amount you will not sink. Mages luckily have equipment that is very light, and soon he was far from the bridge— when suddenly, a huge shadow appeared beneath him.

Right after, the leader was dragged into the water with a splash. Leaving little bubbles, he sank into the lake, and before he disappeared, some vague points of red light can be seen.

The devil that is Kirito didn't seem to care about the enemy leader's death, he grabbed the last unlucky mage and raised him up. At the screaming body, he put force into his hands to squeeze...

The violence of this scene shakes Lyfa and at that moment, she finally came to her senses and shouted:

"Ah, Kirito-kun!! Leave that man alive!!"

While Yui said, "That was very impressive," and other senseless comments on her shoulder, Lyfa walked out. The devil stopped and turned around, and with an unhappy sound released the Salamander in the air.

The man fell on the bridge with a snapping sound, his relaxed body breathing heavily, Lyfa came in front of him, and put the long sword in her right hand between his legs. With the metal sound when her sword tip hit the bridge, the man shuddered.

"Now, tell us who sent you!!"

Lyfa was trying to scare him, but that woke him up from his shock, his face pale, he shook his head.

"If you're gonna kill me, then do it!"

"Why you.."

At the moment, the devil looking down from above, black mist shrouded him, and the huge body began to disappear. Lyfa looked up, from center of the fog, a small figure jumped out and landed on the bridge.

"Oh, nice rampage!"

Kirito shook his head and said in a relaxed tone, putting the sword on his back. He went to the man who blankly opened his mouth and squatting down beside him, patted his shoulder.

"Yo, Nice Fight."

"What...?"

Kirito stared at the stunned man, with a bright, clear tone, continued:

"It was nice fighting tactics. If it was just me, I would have been defeated fast!"

"W...wait, Kirito-kun..."

"It's ok, fine."

To Lyfa's unhappy remark, Kirito said while winking.

"Well then, let's talk about items with you."

Kirito opened a trade window and then showed him a list of items.

"These are the items and money I got from fighting your group. I was thinking, if you can answer our questions, then I will give these all to you maybe..."

The man's mouth opened and closed a few times, then looked at Kirito with a sly smile. He looked around, probably confirming that the time had expired on the dead Salamanders, and they were already transported back to the «Save Point», he once again looked at Kirito.

"Really?"

"Really, really."

Looking at the two smiling, Lyfa sighed.

"Men can be really—"

"It's like, you can't do anything about them..."

Yui sitting on her shoulder offered a comment. A bit fearful of the contempt from the two women, the two men nodded to each other to signal successful trade negotiations.

The Salamander, who started talking, had a lot to say.

"This evening, Jiitakusu-san, ah he's the leader of the mage group earlier, contacted me with a cell phone e-mail, I was having dinner so I wanted to decline but he forced me to come. When I got there it turned out to be around ten people hunting two people, I thought it might be some kind of bullying, but they said it was the person Kagemune-san fought yesterday, so I understood..."

"Who is that Kagemune-san?"

"He is the Lance group captain. He was a famous Sylph hunter, but yesterday he suffered a rare heavy defeat and retreated home. You guys beat him right?"

Hearing about the Sylph hunting made Lyfa frown. She and Kirito looked at each other. He must be the Salamander group leader they repulsed last night.

"So, why did that Jiitakusu-san want to hunt us?"

"The order seemed to come from someone higher ranked than Jiitakusu-san. Like you are interfering with some kind of «Strategy» or something."

"What strategy?"

"The Salamander upper ranks are up to something. They won't tell junior soldiers like me, but I know they are after something big. Today, when I first logged in, I saw a large number fly north."

"North..."

Lyfa put her finger to her lips, and thought. The Salamander capital «Gadan» is in the southern most part of ALfheim, flying straight north, they will hit the mountain range we are currently crossing. Slightly west of that is Ruger Corridor, and east at the base of the mountains is «Dragon Valley». Whichever path they chose, after that is the central city Aarun, and then the world tree.

"Do they want to raid the world tree?"

Hearing Lyfa's question, the man shook his head.

"No way. We are still recovering from the previous complete defeat. The minimum is to equip the army with ancient weapon rank equipment so we are saving money. For that reason our normal routine is very harsh. Even so we only acquired half the target amount of money."

"Oh?"

"Well, that's all I know. Is what you said earlier true?"

The second part he asked Kirito.

"I never lie about a trade."

The Spriggan youth operated the trade window. The Salamander looking at the list of items he is getting was very happy and moved his fingers around.

Lyfa looked at the man with a stunned expression and asked:

"Hey you, these were all your companions' equipment right? Don't you feel bad?"

After hearing this, the man raised his voice:

"You don't seem to understand. These were those guys' arrogantly shown off rare items, which increase my pleasure getting them. Of course it would be bad for me to use them. I will sell them all and maybe buy a house."

'I will let the heat cool off for a few days before returning to Salamander Territory.' Leaving those words behind, the Salamander walked in the direction he came from and was soon out of sight.

It feels like the life and death fight ten minutes before seems like a lie. Lyfa looked at the already back to normal face of Kirito.

"Eh? What?"

"Ah, well... That rampaging devil from earlier, was Kirito-kun right?"

Hearing this, Kirito looked up and scratched his chin.

"Yes, most likely."

"Likely? Wasn't that a tactic to deceive the Salamanders and confuse them with a monster?"

"No, I didn't think that far... it happens to me sometimes. During a fight, I lose control and can't remember things..."

"Woo ah, scary."

"Well, I somehow remember the battle earlier. I used the magic Yui suggested, and became very big. Since my sword disappeared, I had to use my hands..."

"Also with the teeth bite yo ~"

On Lyfa's shoulder, Yui added with pleasure.

"Ah, speaking about that. The experience of being a monster is fun."

Watching Kirito smile and laugh, Lyfa suddenly wanted to know something. She gingerly opened her mouth.

"Did you... taste it? The Salamander..."

"...It is something like charred BBQ flavor and texture..."

"Waa, enough, don't say it!"

She waved her hands at Kirito. Suddenly her hand was caught...

"Gaoou!!"

Shouting that, he opened his mouth and closed it on Lyfa's fingers.

"Kyaaaaa———!!"

Lyfa screamed, after that came a Bang sound that made ripples on the lake surface.

"Ouch, it hurts."

While rubbing his face that got slapped by Lyfa, Kirito slowly walked.

"That was papa's fault!"

"That's true. You were really rude."

Hearing Lyfa and Yui on her shoulder say so, Kirito looked like a reprimanded child and argued.

"I was trying to ease the battle tension and pent up energy, with wit and joke.."

"Next time you do that, I'll cut you."

Lyfa closed her eyes and turned away, speeding up the pace.

In front is a huge stone gate that reached the ceiling. This is the city gate of the mining town Ruger.

For re-supply and sorting out information, it's best to stay the night in town. The unexpected large-scale fighting took a lot of time, so the real time is almost around midnight.

This is now the time that ALfheim starts to get busy, but Lyfa is still a student, so the latest she can stay in game is 1am. She told Kirito about this, he considered for a moment then nodded in understanding.

Passing through the gate side by side, instead of BGM, the NPC orchestra played wonderfully happy drums to greet the arrival of the two.

The scale of the street is not large, but at the the central intersection, shops for weapon and armor, all kinds of material, wine, food and many other types, and workshops all crowded together. The number of players were more than imagined. Under normal circumstances, the rarely met

musical fairies (Pucas), blacksmith goblins (Leprechaun) and other ethnic groups were here, talking happily side-by-side.

"Oh... So this is Ruger."

Lyfa looked at the first time seen bustling underground city, and could not help but issue a happy voice. She rushed to the closest shop, checking out its display of swords. Even in these simple shops, buying things is a very exciting thing for her.

"By the way..."

While Lyfa started playing with a silver long sword, Kirito behind her with a laid-back tone said that.

"What?"

"Before the Salamanders attacked, didn't you get a message? What was it about?"

"...Ah."

Lyfa greatly opened her mouth, and turned around.

"I forgot."

She hurriedly opened the window, and checked the receive directory. Reading Recon's message again, it still didn't make any sense. It might have been cut off due to a connection problem, but there didn't seem to be a continuing message.

In this case, I'll just send him a message, but Recon's name in her friend list was gray. That means he was offline.

"What? He went to sleep?"

"Try to contact him on the other side?"

Lyfa thought about Kirito's suggestion.

To be honest, Lyfa did not like bringing ALfheim world events into the real world. She never went to the ALO community site, and she rarely talked to Recon— i.e. Shinichi Nagata, about game-related things in reality.

But that that enigmatic message had a pull on her is true.

"Then, I am going to log off and check it out, Kirito-kun, wait for me. Please look after my body. ...Yui-chan."

Lyfa then looked at Yui on her shoulder and added.

"Yes?"

"You have to watch your papa; do not let him take advantage of my body."

"Understood!"

"Hey!"

Kirito shook his head in jest and smiled. Lyfa sat on a nearby bench and waved her right hand.

She pressed the log out button, and took her fourth world change of the day. With a feeling of vertigo, her senses returned to the the real world far away.

"Fuu..."

She hadn't been logged in for such a long time in a while, so it left her feeling a little fatigued. She took a deep breath.

While wearing the Amuspere, she rolled over on the bed and looked at the alarm clock. Soon Midori will be home. It's better to meet with her at least...

While thinking that, she reached for her cell phone on the headboard. The EL panel on the external of the phone displayed calls received while she was logged in.

"What is this?"

Suguha's eyes widened. Twelve missed calls, all from Nagata Shinichi. If a family member, police, hospital or any type of emergency called, the linkage program through Amuspere would automatically log out, but Nagata's number was not in that list, so it was ignored. Why was he calling this late?

She opened the phone, preparing to return the call, but the thirteenth incoming call lit up her phone with a sapphire blue sheen. Suguha pressed the call key, and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello, Nagata-kun? What is it?"

"Ah! You've finally come out! It's too late, Suguha-chan!!"

"What do you mean too late? I was busy inside."

"Big trouble! Sigurd! That guy sold us out. Not just us, but the lord, Sakuya-san, as well. He sold us all out!"

"Sold us out? What do you mean? Explain from the beginning."

"Hmm, there is no time... Well, when we were attacked yesterday in the Ancient Forest by the Salamanders, Suguha-chan didn't you feel it was suspicious?"

Nagata returned to his habitual way of calling Suguha. When talking face-to-face, if he called her the too familiar name of Suguha-chan, she would always attack him physically. But since she couldn't do that on the phone, she had to accept it grudgingly.

Saying that, Suguha was surprised that it only happened the day before. It seemed like a long time ago since she met Kirito.

"Eh? Suspicious? What happened?"

To tell the truth, her impression of Kirito was too strong that she couldn't remember the aerial combat before.

"In the beginning, when we were attacked by eight Salamanders, Sigurd wanted to be the bait and led three of them away right?"

"Ah, that reminds me. He didn't manage to escape either right?"

"That's right. But, thinking carefully about it now, that is not Sigurd's style at all. Whenever the party splits, he always remains as leader, and makes someone else be the bait, usually ."

"Ah. That is true..."

Sigurd was a capable combat commander, but he was self-righteous, and was not satisfied unless he was at the top. Indeed, for him to become bait while the other members escaped, this act of self-sacrifice was unlike his style.

"But, that is, what does it mean?"

"Like I said."

Nagata said like he ate something unpleasant.

"That guy worked with the Salamanders. Probably since a long time ago."

"What!?"

This shocked her to the core, and she clenched her cell phone while shouting.

In ALO, power games between ethnic groups were wide spread and using throw-away accounts for spying was a common occurrence. She was afraid that in her home, Sylvain, many other races, especially Salamanders were camouflaged within as Sylphs.

Basically, those players with low skills, little contributions, and sparse activity were likely to be spies. These people were not allowed near the power hub department. Lyfa was no exception; it hadn't been too long since she was allowed to enter the Lord's mansion behind the Tower of Wind.

But Sigurd had, since the beginning of ALO, actively participated in politics. In the recent election for the Lordship, he had been a candidate which proved his long play. Although the current Lord's high popularity meant he always came up second, he didn't seem to be upset and became assistant. So he had a big impact on the center of power.

Talk of him being a Salamander spy, was hard to understand or believe.

"Hey you, that, do you have proof?"

Suguha asked in surprise.

"I thought something was strange, so since this morning I used «Hollow» to follow Sigurd."

"You really have a lot of time."

«Hollow Body» was Recon's most adept transparency spell. It required high hiding magic and covert action to be mastered to use.

Recon used the name of the English letters «Recon» to refer to the U.S. military reconnaissance team— the correct pronunciation should be similar to RIIKON, it seemed. Due to his role as the lead tracker in hunting, he was the best of the best at tracking. Once, Recon had used his spell to enter the room Lyfa was resting in, he had claimed that it had been to

secretly place her birthday present there, but in the end she had made him confess and Lyfa had mercilessly punished him almost to death.

Nagata ignored Suguha's incredulous words and continued.

"After hearing the bad things he said to you in the tower of wind, I followed him looking for a chance to assassinate him with poison. Then..."

"Wow, what a dangerous guy."

"...In front of an ally, he put on an invisibility cloak and disappeared. So he's finally up to something, I thought. Well, just using an item can't hide him from my eyes."

"Enough boasting. Hurry up and talk about what happened next."

"After going into the sewers, and walking about five minutes, there were two people waiting for him. They were also dressed in invisibility cloaks, and when they took them off I was surprised they were Salamanders!"

"Eh? But even wearing those cloaks can't hide them from the guardians. They would be attacked when they entered the street... It can't be..."

"That, it can. They were wearing «Pass Medallion»."

Pass Medallions were for traders and people of other races who come into our territory, and were given those as a pass after a strict examination. Only the ruling ministry could issue those and they couldn't be transferred to another person. Of course Sigurd had the rights to issue them.

"I thought this was a big scoop so I listened. He told the Salamander to put a Tracer on you. But that's not all. Today, Lord Sakuya and the Cait Sith are going to sign alliance agreements, so she left in maximum secrecy for a neutral city."

"Ah I see, no wonder there was no flag hanging at the lord's mansion."

Nagata's loud cries covered Suguha's mutter.

"That guy, Sigurd, he wanted the Salamanders' big army to attack the alliance ceremony!"

"Wha..."

For an instant, Suguha's breathing stopped. She had already decided she would not be returning when she left, but Sylph territory was still her home

and Sakuya, her beloved lord. The anxious thoughts bubbling up made her shout into the phone microphone.

"This, this thing you should have said it earlier!! That's big trouble!!"

"That's why I said it's big trouble at the start..."

Responding to Nagata's sad argument, Suguha immediately interrupted him.

"That, does Sakuya know? Is there still time!?"

"I feel bad. When I was leaving the sewer, I kicked a stone by mistake..."

"You fool! Making a mistake at that time!"

"...It seems, recently I am starting to enjoy Suguha-chan's anger..."

"You big pervert!! So!? Did you contact her!?"

"The Salamanders' search magic saw through my disguise. I was thinking if they killed me I would be resurrected at the tower, then I could go to the lord's mansion. But they hit me with a poisoned arrow instead, it was really cruel."

Thinking back her previous statement, Suguha suppressed her rebuttal.

"So, what happened to Recon?"

"The Salamanders caught me while I was paralyzed... So I had no choice but to log off. Suguha-chan never answered my calls, and I don't have any other contacts in the real world. Hmm, the conference with the Cait Sith Lord is at one o'clock. Oh no, there's only forty minutes left! What should we do, Suguha-chan!?"

Suguha took a deep breath, and quickly asked:

"Do you know where the negotiations will take place?"

"I don't know the exact location... But it's inside the mountain pass, the «Butterfly Valley» area."

"Understood. ...I will go and try to warn them. There's no time to waste. I am hanging up."

"Ah, Suguha-chan!"

As she was preparing to press the end key, Nagata's minced voice came.

"What is it?"

"Ah, it's about that guy Kirito, what is your relationship with him?"

'Click.'

Suguha immediately ended the call, threw her phone to the headboard, lay her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. She mouthed the only Spell Word that works in the real world, then her consciousness gradually shifted to the other, conspiracy filled, world.

Lyfa opened her eyes and stood up.

"Woah, you surprised me!!"

The surprised Spriggan almost dropped the mysterious food he had bought —something on a skewer that resembled small reptiles— but he managed to hold onto it.

"You are back, Lyfa."

"Welcome back..."

Facing Kirito and Yui who welcomed her back, she didn't have time to say 'I'm back.'

"Kirito-kun... I'm sorry."

"Eh, eh eh?"

"I really need to go to a certain place. I have no time to explain, but I probably won't be able to come back here."

"..."

Kirito gazed at Lyfa for a moment and then nodded.

"Is that so? Alright, let's talk while we move."

"Eh?"

"It doesn't matter where to; we have to use our feet to get out of here anyway right?"

"I see. Then let's run and talk."

The two began running in the direction of the gate leading to Aarun, passing the streets of Ruger.

They passed through the crowd, through the stone door, there was another lake with a bridge through it. While running at full speed, Lyfa explained the situation to Kirito. Fortunately, no matter how fast you run in this world, you won't run out of breath to speak.

"—I see."

After Lyfa finished her story, Kirito turned back toward the front as he considered.

"Can I ask some questions?"

"Go ahead."

"Why would the Salamanders attack the Sylph and Cait Sith Lords? What good does it do?"

"Well, first of all, it can prevent an alliance. As someone from Sylph leaked intelligence to the Salamanders, the Cait Sith there will definitely not stay silent if it is used against them. In the worst case, it may result in a war between the Cait Sith and Sylph races. The Salamanders are currently the strongest force, but if the two races entered an alliance it would probably reverse the balance of power. I think the Salamanders want to prevent that at any cost."

As they crossed the bridge into the cave, Lyfa brought up a map and kept running as she checked the route.

"Also, if they kill the Lord, they will get some amazing bonuses. They will unconditionally receive 30% of the lord's funds stored in the mansion, and for ten days, the territory that the lord rules over would become occupied, then they are free to set taxes and take that money. That is a tremendous amount of money. The reason why Salamander became the largest force in the game was because in the past, they had set a trap for Sylph's first Lord and killed him. Normally lords don't venture into neutral territory. In the history of ALO, only one lord has ever been killed."

"Is that so..."

"That's why... Kirito-kun..."

Still running, Lyfa glanced at Kirito's profile and continued:

"This is a problem for the Sylph race, so you have no reason to get involved. After you get out of this cave, it is a straight forward route towards the city of Aarun. If you go to the conference site, it is not likely you will survive. You will respawn at Sylvain and all of the time it took to get here will have been wasted. Well, to put it bluntly..."

Lyfa had no time to appreciate the complexity of her inner emotions, and before she could stop herself, she said:

"If your objective is to go to the top of the world tree, it may be best to cooperate with the Salamanders. If the Salamander's strategy is successful, then they will get a lot of money. It is almost guaranteed that they will use it to challenge the world tree. Spriggans can be hired as mercenaries. ...I won't complain even if you kill me here."

If that happens, I will not resist, Lyfa thought. It was not something she would think of generally, but this time she was sure she had no chance of winning. She also found the prospect of fighting the boy she had become acquainted with over the past day to be unpleasant.

If that really does happen, then I may never play ALO again. As all of this ran through her mind, Lyfa looked at Kirito's face again, but his expression did not change; instead, he continued running forward and said:

"This is a game after all, so anything can happen. If you want to kill, then you can kill; if there is something you want, then you can steal it."

Kirito paused for a moment before speaking:

"...People who've said that, I have met too many of them. On one level, that is true, and I used to think that way too. But it isn't right. Especially in a virtual world, there are some things that you must protect, no matter how stupid you look. I was taught that by a person very important to me..."

Here, Kirito's voice grew very soft, taking on a warm feeling.

"VRMMOs are called games, but this is a contradiction; splitting the player and the role is not a good idea. If you take on traits in this world, your personality in the real world will reflect these changes. Players and their character are one. I like Lyfa, and I want to be your friend. No matter what the reason, I will not kill you to further my own self-interests, absolutely not!"

"Kirito-kun..." Lyfa suddenly felt unable to breathe so she stopped running. Noticing her falter, Kirito also paused.

Lyfa wrung her hands in thought, but words could not express the feelings racing through her; she continued staring at the dark eyed boy in front of her.

I see... so this is it... Lyfa muttered in the depths of her heart. That was the reason why Lyfa had not become close to anyone in this world. She could not be certain if what she saw was their true character, or if it was just a personality assumed with the avatar. She could not know if what they said were their true intentions and ideas. She didn't know how to approach them, and to escape their offered hands' weight, she wanted to fly away.

But, she didn't need to worry about that. She just followed what she felt, and that would be enough, since it was real to her.

"...Thank you!"

Lyfa said the words that gently rose from the depths of her heart, knowing that if she spoke more she would start crying.

Hearing that, Kirito laughed in embarrassment.

"Sorry, I exaggerated a bit. It's a bad habit of mine."

"No, it made me happy – then we will say farewell once we exit the cave."

After hearing this, Kirito raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I'll be going with you though."

"Wait, what?"

"Oh no, we've wasted a lot of time. Yui, please navigate while we run."

"Understood!"

Seeing the Pixie that sat on his shoulder nod in agreement, he turned to Lyfa.

"Lend me your hand for a moment."

"Oh, eh..."

Kirito reached out his left hand and grasped Lyfa's right hand. This situation had happened before, but this was the first time they actually held

hands; Lyfa's heart suddenly began noticeably beating very fast. The next moment, Kirito bolted forward at breakneck speeds, abruptly breaking through the wall of the air and creating a wind tunnel. They had been running at a considerable pace earlier, but now they were going even faster. Their incredible speed made the rock texture appear to melt as they passed. With her right hand in Kirito's, her body floated out behind in a horizontal line. Kirito scanned around while cornering in the twisting and turning cave. There was nothing the least bit romantic about it.

"Waahh!?"

Lyfa cried in a high-pitched voice as, looking ahead, she saw blinking yellow cursors getting closer. A group of orcs seemed to have made a nest in the cave.

"That— Those monsters."

Before she finished her sentence, Kirito ran right into the group of Orcs without showing any signs of slowing down.

"Wahhhh!"

Lyfa`s screams mixes together with the roar of the monsters. But one after another, the rain of heavy weapons missed. Kirito saw a gap in the monsters and rushed through with a furious dash. The orcs turned around, voiced their anger, and began to give chase, but Kirito had already broken through into the next passage. After that, they met Orcs and other monsters several more times, but Kirito simply dodged around and rushed past them all. At some point, a giant wave of monsters was following behind Kirito and Lyfa, their movement creating an earthshaking, avalanche-like tremor. On a side note, their action of «Aggravating» is considered very bad manners, as any unwary team that got in the way would most likely be unable to escape annihilation. Fortunately, a point of white light appeared before such a tragedy occurred.

"Oh, that's probably the exit."

After hearing Kirito say this, her vision suddenly went white, and, with a single step, the ground disappeared.

"Hieeeee!?"

Lyfa instinctively closed her eyes and screamed as her feet thrashed about, but she soon noticed that the roaring around her had disappeared.

Gingerly opening her eyes, Lyfa found herself floating through the vast, infinite sky. It appeared that Kirito had not slowed down at all, instead catapulting from the cave opening that was halfway up the mountain. Looking back, she saw the sheer grey cliffs that seemed to continue forever in all directions. Soon after their exit, gravity quickly returned, and their fall drew an arc through the sky.

Hurriedly spreading her wings and gliding, Lyfa exhaled.

"Fuu haa!!"

Breathing rapidly, Lyfa took a look behind them; in the distance was the cave exit, and huddling around it were the monsters that had chased them out. She turned back to Kirito.

"I think years were just shaved off my life!"

"Haha. It definitely saved us some time."

"...For dungeons, it shouldn't be.. while searching for the enemy, make sure you don't gather monsters.. what you did was like another game.."

Lyfa calmed down as she complained, and she began to re-examine the area. The vast plains spread out below, the blue of water sparkled here and there, the water's connection to a meandering river, and beyond that—

"Ah..."

Lyfa gasped involuntarily. At the far end of the sea of clouds floated a huge shadow. A gigantic trunk pierced the earth and heavens like a pillar supporting the sky, with branches and leaves growing on the same scale as celestial bodies.

"So, that... is the World Tree."

Beside her, Kirito whispered in an awed tone. Even from their spot, just a distance ahead of their exit from the mountains, the World Tree had an overwhelming presence despite being almost twenty kilometers away. It was hard to imagine what it would be like to stand at its base. The two of them remained silent as they stared at the World Tree, but before long, Kirito recovered and said:

"Ah, it can't go on like this. Lyfa, where is the Conference of the Lords?"

"Ah, right. The World Tree is situated at the center of the world, in a large bowl created by the surrounding mountains. There are three large passes that lead to the World Tree: from Salamander territory is «Dragon Valley»; from Undine territory, «Rainbow Valley»; and from Cait Sith territory is «Butterfly Valley». The conference will be taking place at «Butterfly Valley», and near the inland exit."

Lyfa looked around and pointed northwest.

"I think we should fly in that direction for some time."

"Okay, how much time is remaining!?"

"...Twenty minutes."

"If they want to attack the conference, the Salamanders will be coming from that direction."

Kirito's finger moved from the Southeast to the Northwest.

"If they arrive earlier than us, we'll be in trouble. Let's just hurry. Yui, do a search, and tell me if a large number of players come into range."

"Yes!"

Yui nodded, and Lyfa and Kirito began accelerating.

"Anyway, are there no monsters in this area?"

Kirito asked while cutting through a cloud cluster.

"The Aarun Plateau is a field with no monsters. So the conference is being deliberately held close to this place."

"In other words, if monsters attacked midway through the talk, it might be a bit of a problem. However, in this case, it would've been very fortunate."

"What do you mean?"

Kirito just laughed with a mischievous smile.

"Like what happened earlier, I was going to lead a bunch of monsters directly through the Salamander force."

"...You have time to think like that? The Salamander group is supposed to be bigger than the one that attacked us in the cave. If we can warn them in

time, we will all run to the Cait Sith territory; if we gather a big group of monsters, who do you think will die?"

"..."

Kirito stroked his chin with a thoughtful look on his face. At that moment...

"There it is, player response!"

Yui suddenly cried out.

"The group in front has 68 players, these probably are the Salamander assault force. In addition, there are fourteen more people on the ground, I expect those are the Sylph and Cait Sith delegations. The two sides will meet in fifty seconds."

Yui finished talking just as they cut through a large cloud. Lyfa looked down on a very broad, green plateau from extremely high in the air.

Somewhere at a lower altitude were innumerable, creeping shadows. Flying in five-man units, they were like a flock of sinister figures sneaking up on their target without a sound.

Her glance was then drawn toward their destination. She could see a small circular platform. There was a long white table with seven chairs on each side, an impromptu conference hall.

The people sitting in the chairs, still deep in conversation, were unaware of the looming threat.

"...We're too late."

Lyfa said from Kirito's side.

There was no time to warn the Lords before the Salamanders arrived— not enough time to escape. Thus, the others must be prepared to become a shield, even at the cost of their lives, to at least allow the Lords to escape.

Lyfa took her hand and held Kirito's.

"Thank you, Kirito-kun, for bringing me here. You go to the World Tree, and though the time we traveled together was short, I was very happy."

Lyfa said with a smile, but as she folded her wings to an acute angle for diving, Kirito caught her right hand. Lyfa turned to him, and on Kirito's face floated his usual fearless smile.

"It is not in my nature to run away!"

Kirito let go of her hand, moved Yui off his shoulder into his breast pocket, and, beating his wings violently, suddenly accelerated. BANG! Lyfa closed her eyes from the force of the sonic boom, and, when she re-opened them, Kirito was diving toward the platform.

"What!! What are you doing!!?"

The moment of farewell and her sad words of parting made worthless, Lyfa argued back, but Kirito had already left her far behind. Stunned, she hurriedly chased him.

At their destination, the Cait Sith and Sylphids finally noticed the large group. One by one, they jumped off their chairs and drew their shining silver swords, but, compared to the Salamanders and their equipment, they seemed very fragile.

Flying over the grassland, the Salamander vanguard held their lances up like birds-of-prey ready to dive on defenseless rabbits. The troops behind fanned out to the left and right, half surrounding the platform. Moments before the killing, the world was shrouded in silence.

One Salamander raised his hand, and just as he was about to let it drop...

A huge cloud of dust rose from center of the platform between the two groups. Then an instant later KA-BOOM! A loud explosion seemed to cause even the atmosphere to tremble, and Kirito landed like a black meteor without slowing down.

All the players on the ground stood frozen in place. As the dust gradually thinned out, Kirito slowly stood up, in general contempt of the Salamander Army. He leaned back, took a deep breath, and yelled:

"Both sides, put your weapons away!!"

"Woo ah!"

Lyfa, still diving, instinctively dropped her head. What an incredibly loud sound, although it's not as loud as that earlier explosion. It caused even Lyfa, who was still about ten meters in the air, to shake. For the Salamanders, whether it was from physical pressure or just shock, they were trembling a bit as they moved back little by little.

It was not the voice that surprised everyone; it was the fearless courage within it. What exactly is that guy doing? No one could guess.

Lyfa looked at the scene as a cold sweat went down her back. Behind Kirito, Lyfa landed near the green clothed group who should be Sylph. Looking around, Lyfa immediately saw a familiar figure.

"Sakuya!"

Hearing someone call her name, that Sylph looked around with a dazed expression and opened her eyes wide when she saw Lyfa.

"Lyfa!? Why are you here!? No, what is going on here...?"

Lyfa opened her mouth while thinking, this was the first time she has ever seen Sakuya so confused, and said:

"It's hard to explain, but right now, our fate is in that person's hands!"

"What is going on?"

The Sylph lord looked at the small back of the figure dressed in black. While sympathetic to her thoughts, Lyfa studied the current Sylph Lord, Sakuya.

The woman had a beautiful slender straight posture, with waist-length green hair so dark it was nearly black. She had pale white skin, slightly slit eyes, a high nose, and thin lips. if you were to describe her beauty, it would be the beauty of a finely honed blade.

Wearing long Japanese style clothes that hugged her body, from her obi hung a katana nearly two inches longer than Lyfa's. Delicate white feet in high crimson clogs peeked out from beneath the hem of her clothes. Looking at that unforgettable figure, it was no wonder she won the election for Lord with an impressive 80% of the votes.

Of course, the votes didn't just come from her beauty alone. Because of the pressures of being the lord, she could rarely participate in hunting, so her numerical stats can not be called terribly high. However, her sword skills were such that she was usually in the final round during tournament duels, and her just personality also maintained her overwhelming popularity.

Moving her eyes, Lyfa's gaze came to rest on a petite female player beside Sakuya.

The wavy, blond hair surrounding the big triangular ears on both sides of her head marked her as a Cait Sith. She wore armor that resembled a one-piece swimsuit, boldly exposing delicately-tanned skin. From both sides of her waist hung claw-type weapons with three huge protruding nails. A colorful stripe near her hips emphasized her tail, which was twitching and trembling in tension.

Looking at her profile, you could see long eyelashes that covered big eyes and a slightly round small nose. Her avatar in ALO was unusual, but it could be described as a charming little girl. Although it is the first time Lyfa had seen her, it was probably safe to say she was the Cait Sith Lord, Alicia Rue. Like Sakuya, she maintained her position as Lord through overwhelming popularity.

Behind the two lords who stood together, six Cait Siths and six Sylphids stood by the long white table, all showing bewildered expressions. She didn't know any of the Cait Siths, but all the Sylphs were members of the council group of strong players. Taking a closer look at this group of people, Lyfa confirmed that Sigurd was not present.

As Lyfa turned to look at the Salamander forces on the southern part of the plateau, Kirito again shouted:

"I have something to say to the commander!"

This fearless attitude seemed to overwhelm the Salamander soldiers, their Lance group opened up a path. From that path in the air came a large soldier.

Bristling flame-like hair framed a face reminiscent of a dark-skinned bird of prey. His strong body was covered in the ultra-rare Blood Armor, and he carried a huge sword far stronger than Kirito's.

Seeing his eyes flash crimson for a moment, Lyfa felt a cold sweat run down her back. Though she wasn't facing him directly, this was the first time Lyfa had felt such an intimidating aura from an opponent.

With a Gasha sound he landed in front of Kirito, without any expression he looked down at Kirito with contempt. Eventually, the Salamander opened his mouth and, with a deep, penetrating voice, asked:

"...What is a Spriggan doing in such a place? Not that it will stop us from killing you, but I will listen to your story in deference to the courage you are displaying."

Kirito, without any hesitation, said loudly:

"My name is Kirito, and I am the representative of the Spriggan-Undine Union. Am I to understand that by attacking this place, you wish to start a full-scale war with all four of our races?"

Uwaa...

Lyfa was speechless. The idea was just too illogical. This time real cold sweat streamed down her back from the outrageous story he was telling. At this point, Sakuya and Alicia Rue turned to Lyfa in surprise, only to see her desperate wink.

But the Salamander commander also seemed to be truly surprised.

"Spriggan-Undine Union...?"

His expression soon returned to normal.

"You say that you are the ambassador, but where is your escort?"

"Ah, yes. I came here to conduct trade negotiations with the Sylph and Cait Sith. However, if you attack us at the conference, it will be a different matter. In essence you would be forcing all four races into an alliance against the Salamanders."

Suddenly, the world again fell into silence, only to be broken by the Salamander leader's remarks.

"Hmm, even if you are who you say you are, how can I believe someone who came alone and with such bad equipment!?"

The Salamander put his hand to his back and loudly unsheathed a huge, double-edged sword. It had a dark-red gloss and two intertwined dragons were etched on its surface.

"If you can withstand my attacks for thirty seconds, I'll trust you as an ambassador!"

"You're so generous, aren't you?"

Kirito drew his own double-edged sword as he spoke. Unlike the Salamander, his sword is a dull reddish-black with no decoration.

Kirito's wings started vibrating and he floated into the air, hovering at the same height as the Salamander. Lyfa thought it felt as though the fighting

spirit was being compressed between the two, and it would start bursting out in white sparks.

...Thirty seconds...

Lyfa gulped with a deep sound.

Given Kirito's abilities and strength, this should be quite generous. But from the murderous intent that practically oozed from the Salamander commander, Lyfa could tell he wasn't an ordinary case either.

In the tense atmosphere, Sakuya, who was standing next to Lyfa, whispered:

"This is bad..."

"What...?"

"That Salamander, the two-handed sword he's holding, I've seen it before on a website reviewing legendary weapons. It's the «Demonic Sword Gram», which would make that man «General Eugene». Did you know that?"

"...Only the name..."

Lyfa held her breath and nodded her head, and Sakuya continued:

"He is the brother of Salamander Lord «Mortimer», possibly in the real world as well. He has the pure strength to match his brother's wisdom. He is said to be the Salamander`s strongest warrior.. which means he's..."

"...The strongest player!?"

"That's right... This has turned out to be quite terrible."

"...Kirito-kun..."

Lyfa clasped her hands tightly to her chest.

The two people hovering in the air faced each other across the intervening distance, seeming to measure their opponent. Low-altitude clouds covered the sun, and pillars of light shone through the gaps. One of those beams reflected brilliantly off of the Salamander's sword, and, at that moment.

Eugene launched his attack without any predictable movements.

Phew! With a ring, Eugene moved at super-high-speed, causing the air to vibrate. His sword drew a crimson arc in the air as it was swung toward the diminutive Spriggan.

Kirito's reaction speed was unbelievably fast. He acted without any excess movements, expanding his wings and blocking Eugene's overhead strike. After parrying his opponent's attack, Kirito would immediately counter— Predictable enough, Lyfa thought, but...

"—?"

At the moment the black sword and the crimson sword crossed, the crimson sword seemed to change to vapor. It passed through Kirito's sword, and returned to normal.

Dagaaan!! With a burst of sound that could shake the world, Kirito was hit in the chest by an explosion of tremendous strength. He looked like a black leaf blown through a storm as he plummeted earthward. There was another roar, and the dust rose as he struck the ground.

"What just...!?"

Lyfa's speechless question was answered by Alicia Rue.

"«Demonic Sword Gram» has a special ability called «Ethereal Shift». When it comes in contact with defensive shields, swords, or other objects, it phases. In other words, it has a 'pass through' extra effect."

"How, how could..."

Lyfa hurriedly checked Kirito's HP value. But suddenly, a shadow leaped from the dust cloud, rushing straight at the still-hovering Eugene.

"Oh, he's still alive!"

As if nothing had happened, Kirito stopped and asked:

"What was that earlier attack!?"

Kirito remarked while swinging his sword.

KLANG KLANG! Metallic sound continued. Kirito didn't seem to be one to give up due to having inferior weapon. Even though Lyfa's eyes could not discern Kirito's countless strikes, Eugene was repelling the attacks with his two-handed sword.

For just a brief moment, Kirito's assault seemed to pause, but that was enough.

Gram once again shined a fierce light. As Kirito was about block an attack aimed at his side, the sword dissolved, only to reappear beyond his guard and bite deeply into his abdomen.

"Guhaaa!!"

Kirito cried as he coughed up air from his lungs, this time he was spun in the air. With his wings fully extended, he managed to stop and regain his balance.

"That is definitely effective.. Hey, hasn't thirty seconds passed yet?"

Hearing Kirito's remarks, Eugene just laughed arrogantly.

"Sorry, now I really want to cut you down. I'm changing the plan, this time I'll remove your head!"

"This guy.. I'll make you regret it!"

Kirito again prepared to attack, though unfortunately, there seemed to be no doubt as to who the winner would be.

To prevent the special attacks from «Demonic Sword Gram», Kirito could do nothing to defend. Instead, he had to avoid all attacks. But that was almost impossible in this high-speed, close-quarters-combat.

Coming to the same conclusion, Sakuya whispered:

"The situation is grim. Although the players might be seen as equal, the performance of their weapons is far too different. For the one and only «Demonic Sword Gram», only the legendary weapon, «Holy Sword Excaliber», can compete against it, but no one knows where or how to obtain it..."

"..."

Even so, if it is Kirito... Although he appeared to be just a novice, he had demonstrated great strength... This Spriggan was certainly an enigma. While thinking this, Lyfa clasped her hands to her chest as if praying.

Eugene's red wings blurred into a band of light as he thrust his sword forward. Kirito avoided the attack with dangerous random flying.

While fighting, the two of them flew in a complex pattern, time and time again there were attack effect flashes before they separated. Kirito's health had already been reduced to about half by the two attacks he had taken. Eugene was not a normal opponent though, easily able to cut through Kirito's defenses that had withstood multiple magic attacks earlier.

Kirito suddenly turned around and thrust out his right hand. He chanted an incantation, and black dust sparkled from his outstretched hand...

Bang, bang, bang, bang! Jet-black streams of smoke erupted around the two opponents. A long-range fascination magic quickly expanded to cover the entire airspace.

The darkness descended to above Lyfa's head and the surroundings became dark. Lyfa`s vision was obscured by the darkness, and she desperately searched for Kirito.

"Lyfa, lend me this for a little bit."

"Huh!?"

A voice suddenly whispered in her ears, and she felt her katana being drawn from its sheath at her waist.

"Ki..Kirito-kun!?"

Lyfa hurriedly turned around. There was no one there, but her sheath was inexplicably empty.

"Are you trying to stall!!?"

Eugene cried from the center of the thick smoke. Immediately came the sound of a spell incantation.

WHACK! A red light burst out in an expanding sphere, dispelling the smoke. The smoke faded quickly, once again restoring light to the world.

Lyfa hurriedly looked to the blue sky. There was...

No sign of Kirito.

The only one hovering in air was the Salamander general. The little Spriggan is nowhere in sight.

"No way.. he fled..."

Behind, a Cait Sith cried in astonishment. But before he finished, Lyfa cried out:

"Of course he didn't!"

There is absolutely no way. Even if any other player would flee, he would not run.

This young man, Kirito, did not «play» VRMMO games; he «lived» them. He believed that this world was another reality, and that all the trust

cultivated, all the bonds formed, and all the love created here was the truth.

Therefore, hey.. I can hear it...

It was coming from above, the sound of a flight so powerfully beautiful it resembled the sound from a flute. Approaching closer and closer, louder and louder.

"...!!"

The moment she finally found his figure, it was cast in rainbows by the tears appearing in Lyfa's eyes.

From the middle of the sun, the object that created the strongest light effects in ALfheim, falling from the sky through the white light of heaven, a small shadow rapidly descends.

Eugene noticed a few seconds later than Lyfa and looked up. Frowning at the strong effect, he raised his left hand to shield his eyes from the sun's strong light. An average player would have moved horizontally to avoid the sun's rays and to follow the space where the shadow was falling.

However, the general Eugene, worthy of his reputation, closed his mouth, then opened it greatly.

"Waaahhhhh!!"

With a yell that seemed to make earth and heavens tremble, he turned toward the sun like a true Salamander. With a streak of red light, he shot up like a rocket.

Kirito incoming from above held his black greatsword, which he normally used with both hands, in his right hand only. His left hand was hidden behind his back so it could not be seen.

In the strong light, what he held in his left hand flashed, and it was raised up high.

What caused that silver flash? That was the katana that Kirito had just taken from the sheath at her waist, if Lyfa was not mistaken. That was, Kirito now held a sword in each hand.

Two-sword style— This concept was not entirely new. Despite the many people that attempted to use it, Lyfa didn't know of any who had

succeeded. It was incredibly difficult to manipulate swords with both hands and to have them work in sync.

During kendo competitions in the real world, it was not against the rules to use two bamboo swords, one large and one smaller. However, it was prohibited in middle or high school competitions, and the number of university students who could use two swords is very small. Anyway, she had never used two swords. It might have its advantages, but it was too difficult to be practical. It was said that the same was true in the virtual world.

Still, Kirito was armed with two swords. Eugene apparently thought it was an act of desperation and had a contemptuous smile on his face.

Lyfa opened her eyes wet with tears and wholeheartedly believed in Kirito.

The Salamander raised his demonic sword and, with a solemn twist, swung it at Kirito. The Spriggan's left-hand sword rose in an intersecting orbit to meet it.

Bang! The dark red sword began to vibrate. «Ethereal Shift» activated, penetrating Kirito's guard and plunging toward his neck.

KLANG! With a sharp metallic sound, Gram was deflected. What stopped it was Kirito's exactly timed thrust using the greatsword in his right hand. Like threading the eye of a needle, perfect timing.

Kirito faced the astonished Eugene, and issued a thunderous roar.

"O...ooooaaaa——!!"

With swords in both hands, he attacked with speed so overwhelming that the swords appeared to turn into mist.

The katana in his left hand swept out, followed by a thrust with the great sword in a perfectly linked motion. As the greatsword pulled back, the katana slashed once again, from the lower left, and, after returning along the same path, the greatsword chopped down heavily from above.

Silver and black melded together as the onslaught of attacks fell like meteors through the night sky. How much training it would take to achieve that kind of speed with a two-sword style, Lyfa could not imagine. Eugene retreated and tried to use Ethereal Shift to fight back, but his sword could not pass through twice, it was blocked by Kirito's double barrier.

"Nuooh!!"

As General Eugene was rapidly forced toward the ground, he roared deeply. The special effects of his armor formed a thin wall of flame like a hemisphere, pushing Kirito back a little. In that moment, the demonic sword came up—

KONG! With loud noise, Eugene went on the offensive.

Kirito did not hesitate in rushing in either, and the katana in his left hand gleamed as it swung down at a speed matched only by lightning.

JANG! The shrill scream of metal flowed out. Blinding sparks cascaded down in an arc through the air.

Before the Ethereal Shift could even activate, Kirito's sword hit Gram's side and deflected it. Eugene's attack grazed Kirito's left shoulder and moved to his back. Right after...

"Ra...aaaaaa!!"

With amazing ease, the sword in Kirito's right hand thrust straight forward.

Thunk! Low notes sounded, the black blade went through the Salamander`s body.

"Guahhh!!"

Kirito's nearly god-like speed coupled with their incoming speed resulted in terrific damage. Eugene's HP bar plunged into the yellow zone in an instant.

Kirito's attacks did not stop there. As Eugene tried to recover, Kirito quickly pulled his great sword back, resuming his attack form and using his left hand katana to start a combo that Lyfa was unable to follow. In one breath, four cuts of his sword drew a beautiful track in the air, forming a square that wrapped around the Salamander`s huge body.

"...!!"

General Eugene expressed astonishment as his upper body, from right shoulder to his left waist, slid away without a sound. The light forming the square dispersed in every direction.

Right after, General Eugene`s body began burning, and he collapsed into a huge End Frame.

No one moved.

From the Sylphids and the Cait Siths to the over fifty members of the Salamander assault force, everyone froze.

It was a battle at such high level that no one had ever seen anything like it.

In general, fighting in ALO was a graceless brandishing of weapons at close-range or a mindless reliance on magic without even a hint of skill in long-range combat. Defense and evasion were techniques performed only by very experienced long time players, things like face-to-face high skill combat could only be seen at the final rounds at fighting tournaments.

But this time, the fight between Kirito and Eugene was much more than that.

Ornate sword-dancing tearing the air, high-speed flight, Eugene and his earth-shattering sword, and Kirito's ultra-high speed two sword style that defeated it...

Sakuya was the first to break the silence.

"Wonderful, wonderful!!"

She said in a forceful voice as she clapped her hands.

"Amazing! Nice fight!"

Alicia Rue said immediately, followed by the twelve people behind her. Grand applause, mixed with whistles and a loud "BRAVO!" resounded in an immense tumult.

Lyfa watched the Salamander forces with bated breath. Surely, in the case of their commander being defeated, they won't be able to take it lying down—

Surprisingly, the wave of applause also transmitted from the Salamander troops there. Continuous cheers rang out, they raised their lances and waved them like a banner.

"Ooh...!"

Lyfa smiled unintentionally.

Up till now, she had only thought of the Salamanders as enemies – a lawless group of robbers, but they were still players of ALO before any of that. The amazing duel between Eugene and Kirito was enough to sway their hearts.

Caught in the exaltation, Lyfa also clapped her hands with all her heart.

In the center of the ring of applause, Kirito's face emerged with a smile, he resheathed his sword and raised his right hand.

"Ah, thank you, thank you!"

Kirito bowed in every direction, turned in Lyfa's direction, and shouted:

"Will someone please use revival magic?!"

"Understood."

Nodding, Sakuya floated through the air and stopped beside Eugene's Remain Light. With the hem of her kimono fluttering, she began the incantation for revival magic.

A blue light emerged from Sakuya's hands and wrapped around the red flame. The complicated magic circle solidified and the flame expanded, eventually forming a human shape.

Then with a final strong flash, the magic circle disappeared. Kirito, Sakuya and the revived Eugene landed in silence on the platform edge. Silence once again descended upon them.

"...That was impressive skill. You bastard, you are the strongest player I have ever seen."

Eugene said with a calm tone.

"Thank you."

Was Kirito's short response.

"That a Spriggan like you exists, the world is a very big place."

"My story, do you believe it now?"

"..."

Eugene narrowed his eyes, suddenly silent.

At this time, from the Salamander vanguard, a player ran over to Eugene. The player in armor stood at attention, then used his left hand to lift his visor.

He had a rugged face, Lyfa could tell as he bowed to Eugene before speaking.

"Gene-san, do you have a moment?"

"Ah, Kagemune, what is it?"

Where have I heard this name before? —Lyfa thought for a moment, before remembering. That was the name the surviving Salamander from the lake had mentioned. Kagemune was the captain of the troop of Salamanders that Kirito had wiped out at the Ancient Forest yesterday.

"I think you already know, but yesterday my party was annihilated."

Hearing him talking about that, Lyfa swallowed her saliva and strained her ears to listen.

"Yes."

"It was this Spriggan, I'm sure, but he also had an Undine companion."

"...!?"

Surprised, Lyfa looked at Kagemune's profile. Kirito's eyebrows twitched momentarily before his poker face settled back into place. Kagemune continued:

"In addition, from the information of the 'S', a team was sent to hunt this man. They seem to have been repulsed."

'S' was probably a code for a spy. But the 'S' might also stand for Sigurd...

Eugene looked down at Kagemune's face. Most people around them began whispering to each other, and Lyfa's palms began sweating, waiting for the other's response.

Finally, Eugene nodded and said:

"Is that so?"

He smiled slightly.

"I'll leave it at that..."

Then he turned to Kirito.

"Neither our Lord nor I have any desire to provoke the Spriggans and Undines under the current conditions. We will leave this place, but, one day, I would like to fight you once again."

"I await that day."

Kirito thrust his fist in front of him. Eugene knocked his fist against Kirito's and turned around. Spreading his wings, he kicked off the ground and flew away.

As he flew away, Kagemune looked back at Lyfa, and, with a laugh in his eyes, awkwardly winked his right eye. I repaid what I owed you— that's probably what he meant, Lyfa thought with a slight smile on her face.

Seeing the two Salamanders fly away, Lyfa released the breath she had been holding.

As the people on the ground watched, the Salamander troops formed up neatly and with very little confusion. As they left, their wings issued a dull tremble with Eugene's wings leading. Their presence soon faded, and, as they entered the clouds, they were swallowed up and completely disappeared.

The silence descended once again, this time to be broken by Kirito's laughter.

"...So there are Salamanders who can understand talks."

Lyfa was lost for a few seconds, then the words building in the depths of her stomach finally flowed out.

"...You, are too much."

"I've often heard that."

"...Ha ha ha."

Their laughter was finally stopped with a cough from Sakuya, before she said:

"Sorry... but it would be helpful if you could explain the situation."

As the calm was restored on the platform, Lyfa told the whole story, although some of the content was speculative. Sakuya, Alicia Rue, and the elders of the two communities listened quietly until Lyfa finished, then they all made a deep sigh.

"...So that's what happened."

Sakuya, arms crossed over her chest, gorgeous eyebrows arched down, nodded her head.

"For the past few months, Sigurd's attitude became very restless. I felt he was up to something, but I couldn't remove him from the council for fear of being seen as a dictator."

"Sakuya-chan, it seems your popularity put you in a difficult position."

Alicia Rue, who had been in power even longer than Sakuya, nodded deeply.

"Restless... from what?"

Lyfa asked since she still couldn't understand Sigurd's mindset, Sakuya answered:

"It was probably that his heart could not forgive the situation. He could not tolerate being second place to the Salamanders."

"..."

"Sigurd is a man driven by power, both in his character's numerical stats and in his political power as a player... hence the thought of the Salamanders conquering the world tree and ruling over the skies of

ALFheim, the idea of looking up at them from the ground... that is something he would not forgive."

"...But even so, why would he spy for the Salamanders?"

"Did you hear about «UPDATE 5.0», soon to be introduced? Rumors say that it will include a «Rebirth System»."

"Ah... then..."

"He may have struck a deal with Mortimer because as long as the race's Lord agreed, he would be able to become a Salamander. But Rebirth is supposed to cost a huge amount of Yurudo. I doubt that cold-blooded Mortimer would have held up his end of the bargain anyway."

"..."

Lyfa had complicated feelings, so she tried to empty her mind by staring at the gold-colored sky and the distant cloud covered world tree.

Reincarnation as an ALF and being freed of the shackles on flight... this has been Lyfa's dream since she first experienced flight. It was the reason she joined Sigurd's team, it was why she was eager to hunt, turning almost all of the money over to the Sylphid council.

If I had not met Kirito and quit the team, Sigurd may have tried to sway me into his Salamander reincarnation plan. If that had happened, what would I have done?

"ALO really is a sinister game that tests the desires of the players."

Kirito said suddenly, his voice mixed with a wry smile.

"The designer must have a bad character."

"Fufu, that's right."

Sakuya responded with a smile.

Lyfa decided to follow her heart a little. She had held Kirito's left hand in her right and put weight on it. Moving close to Kirito, who seemed unfazed no matter the situation, Lyfa's heart gradually settled down.

"So... what will you do, Sakuya?"

Upon hearing this, the beautiful smile faded into that calculating look of those in power, and her eyes closed. They immediately opened, this time the dark green eyes emit exceptionally bright, clear light.

"Rue, you've been training your dark magic skills, right?"

Upon hearing Sakuya's words, Alicia's large ears twitched back and forth expressing her affirmation.

"Well, then please use «Moonlight Mirror» on Sigurd."

"That's fine, but it is not night yet, so it won't last long."

"Never mind, it will soon be over."

Moving her ears again, Alicia Rue raised her hands, took a step back, and started to chant.

Alicia's tempting voice rose in the rhythm of the rarely heard dark magic incantation. The surroundings darkened suddenly, and moonlight poured quickly out of nowhere.

The moonlight immediately began collecting in front of Alicia, and, like liquid-gold, it formed a round mirror. Everyone watched in silence, and the mirror had a slightly wavy surface, reflecting a view from some other blurred place.

"Ah..."

Lyfa let out the small sound. Projected in the mirror, was a place she had visited a countless number of times: the lord's mansion council room.

Lyfa could see a huge emerald green desk. Behind the desk, in the chair reserved for the Lord, sat a man. He had his legs crossed and propped up on the desk while he leaned back into the chair. His eyes were closed and his head was cradled in his hands; this person was Sigurd.

Sakuya stepped in front of the mirror and called out in a voice like a tightly-strung harp:

"Sigurd!"

In the mirror, Sigurd suddenly opened his eyes and jumped up like a spring. He probably saw in the mirror, coming eye-to-eye with Sakuya, his mouth open and his body shook constantly.

"Sa- Sakuya!?"

"Yes, unfortunately, I'm still alive."

Sakuya replied indifferently.

"Why... no... the conference...?"

"It's likely to end successfully. But the signing of the treaty has just begun. Oh yes, we had an unexpected visitor."

"G... guest...?"

"General Eugene told us to say hello to you!"

"Wha?"

This time, Sigurd seemed to have undergone great surprise. His fine face turned pale, and his eyes shifted restlessly as he searched for words. His eyes locked on Lyfa and Kirito behind Sakuya.

"Ly...!?"

Suddenly, his eyes opened wide, and he finally seemed to grasp the situation. Sigurd bared his teeth in a predatory smile.

"...Those incompetent lizards. So... Sakuya, what do you want? Reprimand money? Kick me out of the Ministry of Power? But if you lose me as army commander, what happens to your political power..."

"No, if you can no longer stand being a Sylph, I'll grant your wish."

"Wh, what...?"

Sakuya elegantly waved her left hand, and a huge system menu exclusively for the Lord appeared. The numerous windows were not stacked, but formed hexagonal columns of light. Sakuya found one particular window and slid it out with a finger.

In the mirror, Sigurd stared as a blue message window appeared in front of him. Looking at the message, his face flushed instantly, and he stood up.

"Why, you..! Are you insane? You... to me... You are going to banish me!?"

"Yes, you will become a renegade and wander the neutral zone. I pray that you can find new fun in this game soon."

"Well... I'll sue you! I will go to a GM with a complaint of an unjust use of power!!"

"As you wish. ...Goodbye, Sigurd."

Sigurd raised his fist and began to continue his tirade. Sakuya touched a button on her menu, and Sigurd disappeared from the mirror. Since he was banished from Sylph territory, he would be randomly transferred to a neutral city other than Aarun.

The gold mirror now reflected an empty council room, but, before long, the surface began to distort. With a loud metallic clang, it shattered, and the shroud that had been covering the setting sun disappeared.

"...Sakuya..."

The silence once again returned, Sakuya's eyebrows furrowed, and Lyfa sensing her feelings called out gently.

The beautiful lord waved her left hand once again, dismissing the menu window, and sighed with a smile.

"Whether my judgement was right or not will be decided at the next lord election. Anyway, thank you Lyfa. I'm very glad you, who stubbornly refused to join the council of elders, came here to the rescue. Alicia as well, I'm sorry you got mixed up in the Sylphid civil unrest and came under danger."

"We survived, so it doesn't matter!"

Following the casual voice of the Cait Sith lord, Lyfa shook her head.

"I did not do anything. If you want to thank someone, you should thank Kirito."

"Yes, now that you mention it... what are you..."

Standing side by side, Sakuya and Alicia Rue looked at Kirito with a question written on their faces.

"Are you actually the ambassador of the Spriggan-Undine Union?"

Out of curiosity, Alicia asked, her tail flicking. With his hand on his right hip, Kirito answered confidently:

"It was all a big lie, of course. A random bluff, but it was necessary for negotiations."

"Wha...!!"

Their mouths dropped open, at an utter loss for words.

"... What an unreasonable man. And boasting such a thing in that situation..."

"When you've been dealt a bad hand, you have to raise the stakes."

Kirito bragged unapologetically. Suddenly, Alicia was smiling, and, with the mischievous smile of a cat, advanced a few steps nearer Kirito, and she looked at his face from close-up.

"You big liar, you're really strong though! Do you know? General Eugene is probably the strongest player in ALO. You actually beat him face-to-face, so you're the Spriggans' secret weapon, right?"

"How could that be? I'm just a humble wandering warrior."

"Pfft, yahahaha!"

This arrogant answer made Alicia laugh, and she took Kirito's right hand and hugged it to her chest. Tilting her head, she gave him a sexy look.

"Free means you can come to Cait Sith territory as a mercenary. I can offer you three meals a day and an afternoon nap."

"Wha..."

Lyfa felt her lips draw tight. But, before she got a chance to speak up, another voice abruptly interrupted.

"Hey Rue, no cutting in line."

In came Sakuya, with a more amorous voice than normal. She was now dressed in a sleeveless dress and grasped Kirito's left arm.

"He came to rescue the Sylphs originally, so that should give us preferential negotiation rights. Kirito-kun, we will go for a drink in Sylvain, which will double as a courtesy, and then we can take care of some personal matters..."

Pili Pili. Lyfa's face turned red with rage and started to twitch uncontrollably.

"Ah, too cunning, Sakuya-chan. I oppose seduction."

"You have a right to say that? You are too close to him!"

Two very beautiful lords were double-teaming Kirito, and his uncomfortable look changed to a red-faced look of embarrassment...

While thinking that, Lyfa grabbed Kirito's collar from behind and cried:

"No! Kirito-kun is my..."

All three turned to look at Lyfa. At the same time, she realized what she was saying and returned to reality.

"That is, m... my..."

Unable to find the words, Lyfa was left in an awkward silence, and watching it all, Kirito smiled and said:

"I appreciate your kindness— But sorry, I promised to go with her to the central region."

"Oh.. is that right? That is unfortunate."

The usually reserved Sakuya voiced her regret truthfully, and turned her gaze to Lyfa.

"You're going to Aarun, Lyfa? Is it a pleasure trip, or...?"

"I was leaving the territory— or so I thought. But, though I don't know when, I will definitely go back to Sylvain."

"I see, that's a relief. You have to return, with him of course."

"Make sure to stop by my house when you do, and I'll roll out the red carpet."

The two Lords left Kirito, and their expressions became solemn. Sakuya put her right hand to her chest and tilted her body gracefully, Alicia bowed her head and her ears drooped a little, both of them thanked Kirito and Lyfa. Sakuya raised her head and said:

"I would like to thank you, Lyfa and Kirito. If we had been defeated, the difference between us and the Salamanders would have grown out of control. I wish to express my gratitude..."

"No, such a thing..."

Seeing Kirito scratch his head with a troubled look on his face, Lyfa suddenly thought of something. She stepped forward and said:

"Well, Sakuya, Alicia. The reason for this alliance, is it for attacking the World Tree?"

"Well, ultimately, that is our goal. We will challenge the World Tree together; if both races are reborn as ALF then that's great, but if not, the race that succeeds is responsible for assisting the other during the next Grand Quest. That is the bone of the alliance."

"Please let us take part in the attack as well, as soon as possible."

Alicia Rue and Sakuya exchanged glances.

"I don't mind you accompanying us. It's more like we want you to join us. But we don't know yet about timing, but why?"

"..."

She took a peek at Kirito. The enigmatic Spriggan boy cast his eyes down for a moment and said:

"The reason why I came to this world is to reach the top of the World Tree. There is a certain person that I must meet, and there is a possibility that person may be there..."

"Person? Are you talking about Fairy King Oberon?"

"No, I think it is someone different. It is someone who I can't contact in the real world, but who I must meet by any means possible."

"Oh, at the top of the world tree means a person on the management side? A really mysterious story, don't you think?"

The topic seemed to have attracted Alicia Rue's interest, as she said with shining eyes, but her ears and tail drooped immediately.

"But... to prepare and fully equip the party members' equipment will take a while... it's not possible in a day or two..."

"I see, that's true... No, my goal is just getting to the base of the tree for now... After that I will think of something."

Kirito laughed slightly and, 'Oh yes', as if reminded of something, Kirito waved his left hand. He quickly manipulated the window, and materialized a huge leather bag.

"This should help in the way of funds."

Saying so, Kirito handed out the bag. Judging from the sound, it seemed to be heavy and full of Yurudo. Alicia who accepted the bag staggered for a moment then hurriedly hugged it with both hands, she looked inside and her eyes instantly became rounded with astonishment.

"Sa... Sakuya-chan, this..."

"Hmm..?"

Sakuya bowed her head as her right hand entered the bag. From the inside she drew out a large coin with a white green shine.

"Waahhhh!"

Seeing this, Lyfa also cried out in an incredulous voice. The two lords continued to stare at the contents of the bags, seemingly frozen in place. The twelve people watching from behind cheered.

"...One hundred thousand Yurudo Mithril coin... all of this!?"

Even for Sakuya, she said in a blurred voice while staring at the coin in doubt. Still amazed and shaking her head, she returned the coin to the bag.

"This kind of money, it is almost impossible to earn this without fighting the Evil God-class monsters in Jötunheimr... Are you sure? With this much money you could build a castle in a prime location."

"I don't mind. It is no longer necessary for me."

Kirito didn't seem to have any deep attachment and nodded.

Sakuya and Alicia once again looked in the bag, released a deep sigh, and lifted their heads.

"...With this much, I think we are fairly close to the target amount."

"We will prepare the equipment immediately and will contact you when we are ready."

"I will leave it to you."

Sakuya opened a menu window, and Alicia put the bag into it.

"Just the thought of wandering around in the field with this much money makes me shiver... Let's get back to Cait Sith territory as quickly as possible before the Salamanders change their mind."

"That's true. We'll continue the conference when we return."

The Lords nodded to each other and signaled to their followers. The long table and chairs were cleaned up quickly.

"We owe you a lot. We promise to do our best to make your wish come true, Kirito and Lyfa."

"I'm glad I was able to help."

"We will wait for your contact."

Sakuya and Alicia shook hands respectively with Kirito and Lyfa.

"Thank you! We'll meet again!"

Alicia once again exposed a mischievous smile, wagged her tail near Kirito and kissed him on the cheek. She left the flustered Kirito and turned toward the frowning Lyfa —What did she mean?— and gave her a quick wink. She then spread her pale yellow wings wide.

The two lords waved their hands and flew straight up, with a streak of light they moved toward the red sky west. The six people from each race lined up in beautiful V, a formation like that of wild geese, and followed.

Lyfa and Kirito watched them until their figures disappeared in the sunset sky.

The sound of wind whistling and the leaves playing on it were the only reminders that a fierce fight had just occurred. A fight with the fate of three races on the line now seemed like nothing more than an illusion. Lyfa felt a bit cold, and nestled up to Kirito.

"...Everyone is gone now."

"Yeah, it is finally over..."

The break with Sigurd and the series of events that followed it, Lyfa felt as though it had been a long time. Not just the seven or eight hours that had truly passed.

"Somehow..."

Together with Kirito, this was the true real world, she felt that this winged her was her true self— Lyfa / Suguha thought, but could not express it in words. Instead, she pressed her body against Kirito's chest, and tried to feel his heartbeat, then...

"Why you, I said no cheating, papa!"

"Waa."

Yui jumped out from Kirito's breast pocket and spoke in an indignant voice. Lyfa hurriedly put some distance between her and Kirito.

"Why so sudden..."

Yui flew around the flustered Kirito's head a few times after he said that, then she sat on his shoulder and her cute face pouted.

"The Lords sticking to you seem to make your heart beat faster for some reason!"

"I-... I am a man, so it can't be helped!!"

Lyfa was relieved when she found out Yui wasn't talking about her, but she had a new doubt so she asked Yui.

"Hey, Yui-chan, am I okay?"

"Lyfa-san seems to be alright."

"Wh, why...?"

"Well, Lyfa doesn't seem to give off the feeling of a woman..."

This blunt reply, came from Kirito.

"Wai... wha... What do you mean by that!?"

She could not ignore those words, Lyfa's hand unintentionally drifted to the handle of her katana.

"N... no, I mean... Like easy to get close to... It's good meaning, yes."

A smile rose on Kirito's face while a chuckle emerged.

"Instead of worrying about that, let's hurry and fly to Aarun! The sun is going down!"

"Ah, hey, wait!!"

Lyfa spread her wings and kicked off the ground.

Kirito aimed for The World Tree accelerating, she chased after him while beating her wings at full force and took a quick look behind. Past those huge mountains, is the vast expanse of Ancient Forest and familiar Sylph territory. However, she didn't linger on it as the stars started to emerge in the navy blue evening sky.

* * *

The sun which seemed to be absolutely still while it hung at the zenith of the sky, slowly tilted, dyeing the horizon with the bright red of sunset.

Now, since the last time Oberon had come to visit Asuna, it has been at least five hours, so she sat up. It is probably past midnight on the other side. She prayed that she was not being monitored and stood on the tile.

Ten steps forward and she came to the golden gate. She could not help being surprised that she had been confined in this small place for more than two months.

But— that ends today.

While thinking that, Asuna stretched out her right hand to the password input board beside the door. Five hours ago, she had used the mirror to see the sequence of numbers needed to open the door when Oberon left, and memorized it. Now, one by one she said them and reproduced the sequence. Whenever she pushed one of the small buttons, the touch received a click in response, and a wave of nervousness passed through her constantly trembling body.

"...3...2...9"

While praying, she entered the final numbers, with a loud metallic sound, the door cracked open. Asuna involuntarily bent her right arm and tightly clenched her fist. When she realized that she was making one of Kirito's favorite gestures, a bubble of laughter floated from her mouth.

"Kirito-kun! I'll do my best!"

Asuna whispered this as she pushed the door open. Beyond that, another branch, much more twisted then those of the cage, formed a small road connecting to the trunk of the huge tree. She left the cage, one step, two steps, the door automatically shut behind her, making a quiet click. Asuna swung her hair, lifted her chest resolutely, and walked toward a different world she was sure to find ahead.

A few minutes later, she glanced back to see the golden cage has been covered by overlapping dark green leaves, and was out of sight.

Asuna stopped in the middle of the long tree branch of the world tree, and sighed. She felt like she had walked several hundred meters. It really is extraordinarily large.

For the impatient Oberon, the log out system terminal should not be that far away from the cage; but it seems she'd thought wrong. If he is using the SAO type window or voice activated controls, it will be quite difficult to access the system.

Nonetheless, I cannot return to that place. I must go as far as I can.

I will certainly survive and return to the real world. To meet him once again.

Asuna engraved this wish on her heart and continued forward.

Author's Notes

How do you do? It's been a long while, this is Kawahara. Thank you for reading. Starting off is a customary, beginning from the apology corner...

I am sorry that the earlier published Accel World 3 and similarly this Sword Art Online 3 too became continuous volumes!

Furthermore, I am sorry for another new heroine appearing, I am truly sorry. I believe that everyone too is gradually sensing the unpleasant trend...perhaps from now on the same kind of development... No, however, after thinking about it, Accel" is like that too. It's not that I was particularly aiming to write like that. Without the ability to write a sculptured group of multi-viewpoints, the number of female character increased and inevitably, without exception, they form a connection with the main character.

...I am sorry, perhaps, it's because around 40% simply likes that stuff...

This SAO3" became my last book with privilege for me to release in 2009. Just as I was writing this afterword, I received a report of the winning work decided for the Dengeki Light Novel Award's grand prize; "Somehow a year has already pass!" I thought and for a while I looked dumbfounded.

Thinking about it, during the 15th award ceremony, my senior novelists were clad in a novelist aura that was overwhelming enough that it was not possible to even greet them.

There were no signs of me reaching that point of emitting that aura, nevertheless the fact that I could somehow continue publishing books is also solely owing to everyone who gave their support. About the next year and onwards, which I fainted thinking about, while it is still the steady typing of the keyboard, I have the intention of ascending this endless distant Dengeki slope.

The new characters (mostly female), who again had a grand-size entry, were delicately and fascinatingly drawn out by the illustrator, abec-san, who I am grateful to for this volume as well. And then, because the preparation of the event, it has been relentlessly busy, and because of my closing forgetting skill (Auto active type), I have greatly troubled my in-charge, Miki-san, and I truly apologize for that.

And now, I too give you, who have read this far, this year's last thanks. Let's do well too in 2010!

October 1st 2009, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ Juki Net is a national registry of Japanese citizens.
2. ↑ A shinai is a weapon used for practice and competition in kendo.
3. ↑ A dōgi is a uniform for training, used in martial arts. A Hakama is a type of traditional Japanese clothing.
4. ↑ Kote: hand and forearm protectors.
5. ↑ Men: facemask and shoulder protector.
6. ↑ The term sanpaku refers to the iris being rather small, so that it only covers about two-thirds or less of the vertical axis of the eye.
7. ↑ Suburi is a Japanese word which is used to describe practice swings.

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Credits

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